

慈禧太后 和 西方女人  
Empress Dowager Cixi and Western Women

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by

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## Abstract

Empress Dowager Cixi<sup>1</sup> is commonly blamed as the main cause of the fall of Chinese dynastic rule early in the twentieth century. The historical narrative consistently states that Cixi's thirst for power, backwardness, and conservative values inevitably meant she was unable to make necessary reform. This narrative does not account for other possible influences Cixi was examining to help her sculpt ideas and possibly resolve the mounting crisis China was facing. The rationale for this study is based on a methodological review of known literature from primary and secondary biographical sources, historical narratives, as well as additional sources regarding gender and race that altered the prevailing views of Cixi. I argued that she attempted to look beyond the limited views of her advisors to the unlikely source of Western women. She utilized unorthodox "tea parties" in her private quarters to gain political knowledge, thus finding an avenue to blend Western and Chinese ways in order to reform China. This paper will review how Cixi has been portrayed through the literature and then examine how she sought to modernize China through her interactions with Western women.

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<sup>1</sup> Although she has been referred to by a number of names (Tz'u-hsi, Tzu-hsi, Tze-Hsi, Tzu Hsi, Xitaihou, Xiaoqin, Xianhuanghou, T'ai-hou, Tuen-Tson-His, etc.), I will refer to her as Her Majesty the Empress Dowager Cixi, or a variation of that name. Only in a direct quote will a different version of her name be included in this paper.

## Introduction

Empress Dowager Cixi lived a life of exceptional elegance, violence, and power, constantly barraged by corrupt government officials and a Chinese populace that couldn't relate to her or her governance. However, Cixi showed a genuine interest in a collection of Western women hoping to find inspiration and influence which she could best use to direct the changing Chinese



Figure 10 Yu Xunling. *Empress Dowager Cixi with Women of the Foreign Legation*, 1903. black and white photographic print. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian, Washington D.C.

government. Through her unassuming social gatherings with select women, she obtained pertinent information about the West, without being influenced by the official Confucian bureaucracy that surrounded her. This information helped influence Chinese modernization which encompassed both Western and Chinese government styles.

Cixi lived during a tumultuous era in Chinese history. Imperial Western powers were invading China and claiming the ancient land as their own, while the Chinese government—itsself controlled by a foreign Manchu dynasty—tried to preserve the country's several thousand-year-old traditions and legacy via isolation and self-sufficiency. Sitting at the helm of the sinking Chinese ship was Cixi. Misguided by poor counsel, her own faults, and attempts to preserve her country's antiquities, she failed many times throughout the course of her reign and was blamed harshly for it, while her own government officials were spinning a negative image about her behind her back to foreigners.

She was born in 1835 to one of the oldest and most well-known Manchu families.<sup>1</sup> Her family was affluent and had supplied generations of high ranking officials to the Qing government, including her own father who was a section chief for the Ministry of Officials. Raised in a hutong, not far from the center of Peking's Forbidden Palace, she was educated similarly to other highbred young Manchu women. Inquisitive and intrigued by government affairs from an early age because of many conversations with her father, she was still seen as lacking credible intellect by others in the Qing government.

During the spring of 1852, at 16 years old, she was chosen to become one of the concubines for the 21 year old Emperor Xianfeng.<sup>2</sup> Scholars are still undecided as to her true first name. However, according to Jung Chang she was simply named, in the court registry as “a woman of the Nala family,” while other records indicate the name Yehara. It was common practice not to record names of females because they were seen as insignificant in the court, hence leading to the ambiguity. Upon becoming a concubine, she was known as Lan, a name given to her by the court officials. She was not fond of it, and when she gained status she asked the Emperor to have it changed. It is suggested that she irritated the Emperor by being too vocal about government affairs and because of this was not frequently in his favor, causing her to remain a low-rank, sixth level concubine for a few years. However, in 1854, Xianfeng eventually promoted Lan to a rank-five concubine and gave her the new name of Yi.<sup>3</sup> In April 1856, Yi gave birth to the Emperor's first male heir, Zaichun, which elevated her status amongst the court

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<sup>1</sup> Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

women again and placed her second only to the Emperor's first wife, Empress Zhen.<sup>4</sup>

During the sacking of Peking at the end of the Second Opium War in 1860, Emperor Xianfeng, Empress Zhen, Concubine Yi, Prince Zaichun, and a majority of the Qing court fled to the royal hunting lodge in the Chengde region. Eleven months after arriving at the lodge, Emperor Xianfeng died from poor health.<sup>5</sup> This left the dynasty in the hands of Zaichun, his five year old son by Concubine Yi, as well as the boy's eight regents. At this point, Yi had no political power; technically she was not even



Figure 1 Yu Xunling, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 1903, black and white photographic print. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

considered the mother of the Emperor, that

distinction belonged to Empress Zhen. However, Empress Zhen and Concubine Yi were close friends and with Zhen's help, they were able to use old court documents to give Yi the title of Dowager Empress and changed her name yet again to Cixi which means "kindly and joyous."<sup>6</sup>

With a title and informal power, Cixi was able to wrangle some political implements. With backing from Emperor Xianfeng's half-brothers, Prince Gong and Prince Chun, she devised the Xinyou coup only a few months after Xianfeng's death. Cixi ordered Zaichun's eight regents to be either dismissed from power or killed.<sup>7</sup> Over the next half century, Cixi would outlive Empress Zhen and two more emperors, including her son and nephew.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 17-18.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 49.

## Gender, Race, and Perception of Cixi

Attitudes regarding gender and race have had a huge influence on the Chinese, Qing government officials, and Westerners in regards to how Cixi was perceived and treated. The Chinese had been living under the philosophical teachings of the three “great thinkers”, Confucius, Laozi and Mencius for centuries. The Chinese abided by a strict relationship hierarchy based on the Confucian theory of showing filial piety to one’s elders. The society was structured by these distinctions: Emperor-subject, father-son, husband-wife, older brother-younger brother, and age in less formal relationships such as friend-friend. Women were submissive in three additional ways, these “obedience’s” were: obey your father until married, obey your husband until he dies, and then obey your eldest son. These rules were intended to maintain order in the general populace and to retain the rights of land ownership to only males with the intention of restricting matriarchal control. Leslie Collins wrote *The New Women: A Psychohistorical Study of the Chinese Feminist Movement from 1900 to the Present* in 1976, in which he analyzes the misrepresentation of women in China stating:

The rare and casual references made to women in works by Lao-tze, Confucius, and Mencius (who tend to focus their attention on “the superior man,” and coincidentally, the “superiority” of men in ruling states and fighting wars) have tended to support traditional masculine Chinese views of women... The Chinese early considered women as in some way unsuited to the arts of statescraft... The other side of this particular ideological coin was the tacit recognition, in the form of discussions of the “bad” influence of women on political matters...<sup>8</sup>

Another form of female subordination was the practice of foot binding. It began during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE) and grew in popularity over the years to include nearly all social ranks. The deformative action consisted of breaking the bones of a young girl’s feet and

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<sup>8</sup> Leslie Collins, “The New Women: A Psychohistorical Study of the Chinese Feminist Movement from 1900 to the Present” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1976), 108.

wrapping them tightly so that the foot never exceeded 4 inches in length. Women with small feet were seen as beautiful, and foot binding also suggested that the girl came from a wealthy family where movement for manual labor was not necessary. Since Cixi was Manchu, and not ethnically Han Chinese, she never endured this torture. Cixi was appalled by the barbaric procedure, even suggesting that her son's wet nurse and her painting instructor unbind their feet which they eagerly did.<sup>9</sup> In 1902, she penned a reform edict telling the people of China to stop the practice of foot binding.<sup>10</sup> The Chinese did not enforce or follow the directive, feeling Cixi should not interfere with ancient customs of another race.

Racial inequality was another challenge Cixi struggled with. The Qing dynasty was created when a band of ethnic Manchu from the North overran the Chinese Ming dynasty in 1644. Even though they incorporated many of the Chinese ways—the Chinese are known as ethnic Han—the Manchu people were viewed as invaders that did not belong in China, much less ruling it. Cixi, along with every other Qing leader, was ethnically Manchu, and all were reviled by the Chinese. The anti-Manchu sentiment was so strong that to avoid harsh ridicule from the Han people, Manchu women commonly tried to conceal their Manchu heritage. They would change their traditional clothing, hairstyles, headdresses, and even attempted to bind their feet as adults.<sup>11</sup> To try and help calm relations between the Han and Manchu, Cixi ordered another reform edict that reversed the centuries old ban on interracial marriages between the two ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). 177.

<sup>10</sup> Meribeth Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912* (New York: Octagon Books Inc, 1963). 62.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Rhoads, *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000). 204.

<sup>12</sup> Meribeth Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912* (New York: Octagon Books Inc, 1963). 62.

Cixi was living in an environment severely hampered by race and gender inequality. The idea that she could lead China was absolutely ludicrous to many in China for these reasons alone. Cixi's reforms and ideas were constantly questioned by many officials in the Qing court, which only spurred negative images portrayed by others in late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. After many months of poor health, eventually leading to a stroke, Cixi died on November 15, 1908 at the age of 72. She played a significant role in shaping the relationship between Chinese and Western powers and has been harshly criticized as the woman who brought the Qing dynasty to its eventual demise.

Since Cixi's death many books and documents have been written about her life. As the narrative developed through biographies written over the last century, the perception of Cixi slowly changed in certain circles. Increasingly, she is less often seen as a villain, but rather as a human who reacted, made choices to the best of her ability, and was misunderstood by Western media. Cixi is usually accused by historians, such as those who will be discussed later in this paper, of being an arch-conservative whose "backwardness" and hunger for power resulted in her becoming a primary obstacle to meaningful reform in late nineteenth and early twentieth century China. This paper will examine Cixi's relationship with Western women in the early twentieth century, suggesting that Cixi may have, in fact, been genuinely interested in westernizing reforms that would have both modernized and preserved the Qing Dynasty. After the Boxer Rebellion, Cixi used space within her private quarters for informal gatherings with Western women, collecting political information which helped her create reforms in the best interest of both Chinese traditions and Western modernity.

## **Literature Review**

Many books, essays, articles and government documents have been written about the reign of Her Majesty the Empress Dowager Cixi. Primary sources varied dramatically in their presentation of her, and provided evidence for both positive and negative evaluations of Cixi. The Western authors cited in this paper—with the exception of Der Ling who was Chinese, but was raised in Europe with Western ideas—are presented chronologically to show how the negative narrative of biographical literature over the last century slowly progressed toward a more neutral and eventual positive perception of Cixi. These sources are intended to encapsulate the essence of Cixi's life and her political and social nuances, as well as discuss Cixi's role in reform and modernization of the Qing dynasty, into the twentieth century.

### **Biographical Sources**

Over the last century and a half an amazing number of biographical books and articles have been written about the Empress Dowager. The majority of these sources cast a negative light on her life and actions, leading to a historical narrative that blurs Cixi's image. Despite the negative campaign against Cixi there has also been a less known positive view that challenges the negative presentation. Opinions regarding Cixi have shifted since her death. By examining the most well-known pieces through the last century an explanation can be made about the narratives that contributed to both the positive and negative views in scholarly research.

There were many scathingly negative portrayals written about the life of Cixi, but the majority seem to stem from a singular source. The most damaging and well-recognized negative work about the Empress Dowager was written in 1910 by Sir Edmund Backhouse and John Otway Percy Bland, two authors known for their anti-dynastic Chinese sentiment. Backhouse, a self-proclaimed Chinese expert or sinologist, and Bland, with his personal contacts wrote the

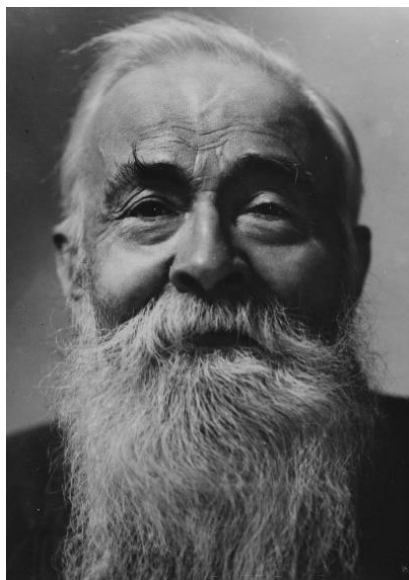


Figure 2 S. Vargassoff, *Sir Edmund Backhouse*, 1943. black and white photographic print. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, England.

official biographical work about Cixi in multiple books and newspapers. Their book, *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzu Hsi* was written about Backhouse's supposed frequent visits with the royal Qing court. The authors asserted that Cixi was a poor leader and that the Qing dynasty would never adapt to Western ways. The biographers critique of Cixi stemmed from their belief that China could not be Westernized. Bland claimed that, "Westernization would fail [in China], that China must and would reassert its independence, must rediscover its historic identity, and reform itself on that base."<sup>13</sup>

A few decades after Bland and Backhouse's book was released, their authority would come into question. In 1934, Kenneth Scott Latourette wrote in the bibliography of his book titled *The Chinese, their History and Culture*, that Backhouse and Bland had used "melodramatic liberties" with "improperly selected" Chinese texts.<sup>14</sup> It is believed that both men had befriended several high ranking Qing court officials and were conspiring to create an inflammatory image of the Empress Dowager because she was interested in blending Western and Chinese culture and politics. Despite Latourette writing mostly in a negative viewpoint, his comments brought Backhouse and Bland into question, and first showed a change in the historical narrative, beginning a transition towards a more balanced image of the Empress Dowager.

<sup>13</sup> Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Hermit of Peking* (New York: Knopf Inc, 1977). 33.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Chinese Their History and Culture* (New York: The MacMillan Co, 1934). 325.

In 1936, Italian scholar Daniele Vare wrote a biography about Cixi, *The Last Empress*, using Bland and Backhouse as references. Although he shared Backhouse and Bland's negative representation about Cixi's poor leadership qualities, he was critical of their ethically ambiguous sources showing yet another transitional twist away from the common negative narrative. He believed certain documents, such as diary entries, had been forged, which cast doubt on the foundation of Backhouse's ideas.<sup>15</sup>

In his 1977 book *Hermit of Peking*, Hugh Trevor-Roper extensively research and analyze the smearing of Cixi's name, political intention, and legacy from known sources from the early twentieth century. He discovery that Backhouse had falsified evidence and possibly even altered historic diary entries

The most balanced and unbiased contemporary work specifically about Cixi was a primary source news article Henry Blake, *The Rule of the Empress Dowager*. Written in 1909 upon the death of Empress Cixi, it mixes both support and distaste for the Empress Dowager. The focus of this article is the historical events that took place while Cixi was alive. Despite all the misguidance from a number of other reports of the time, Blake's work is remarkably neutral, lacking the usual Western sentiment common for the era. Blake's final quote about Cixi sums up the emotions of the era, "with dramatic completeness the life of one of the most remarkable women of history-indomitable, resourceful, ruthless, and tender by turns, but always masterful, around whom love, pity, fear, and hatred have hovered with their lights and shadows for well



Figure 3 Yu Xunling, *Her Highness the Empress Dowager Cixi and American Sarah Pike Conger*, 1903. black and white photographic print. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian, Washington D.C.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 182.



Figure 4 Katherine Carl. *Carl in Chinese Costume*, 1905. black and white photographic print. From: Katherine Carl. *With the Empress Dowager of China*. Charleston: Forgotten Books, 2012. 234.

nigh half a century.”<sup>16</sup> Blake’s work is not common but shows that there was a variance in thought during Cixi’s life, lending a nice contrast to the irrationally negative and glowingly positive views about Cixi.

Many Western women befriended Cixi when the royal family returned to Peking after the Boxer Rebellion; the views of these women were the complete opposite of Backhouse, Bland, Latourette, and Vare. Their intention was to present not only a different image of Cixi, but of China, so the rest of the world would be more willing to work with the Chinese people as they transitioned from their isolationistic lifestyle to something more modern.

As a means of helping promote a positive image of Cixi, painter Katherine Carl was commissioned to paint Cixi’s portrait for the Saint Louis Exposition of 1904. Her two works, *With the Empress Dowager of China*, written by Carl in 1905, and *A Personal Estimate of the Character of the Late Empress Dowager, Tze-Hsi* in 1913, are her personal accounts and impressions of the months she spent living with the Empress Dowager and the royal court members. Carl’s work and writings show another example of the solid relationship Empress Dowager Cixi established with Western woman before her death. In response to



Figure 5 Katherine Carl. *Portrait of the Empress Dowager*. 1904. oil on canvas. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian, Washington D.C

<sup>16</sup> Henry Blake, “The Rule of the Empress Dowager” *Living Age* Vol. 260, Issue 3366 (Boston: Living Age, 1909). 10.

seeing her name appearing in newspapers stating things she had never said, Carl felt inclined to release her own book to combat the Western negative image being created.

The most well-known positive view of the Empress Dowager actually comes from the woman who was the conduit between Carl and Cixi. Sarah Pike Conger's publication, *Letters from China: With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China*, is a collection of diary entries and correspondence compiled in 1909. Conger, whose husband was an American dignitary to China, was one of the first Western women that Cixi met shortly after the Boxer Rebellion. Conger had regular encounters with high ranking Chinese women in the court, including the Empress Dowager, for "political tea parties." Conger developed a relationship with the Empress, and on Cixi's death, stated that she regarded the Empress Dowager as a friend,<sup>17</sup> which lends credence to the concept that Cixi was truly attempting to establish friendly relations with Western women.

The insight into Conger's visits with Cixi represent a different perception that directly contradicts Backhouse's account. She felt strongly that:

The Empress Dowager of China was a great woman, and China's great men recognized and acknowledged this fact...Ignorance of these qualities has brought a pronounced is representation of China's womanhood. May the light of understanding dispel the darkness of ignorance and reveal the true China and her people.<sup>18</sup>

Conger was a big supporter of the Qing court and at times provides an exceedingly shining review as a means of contrasting all the negative press Cixi was receiving. In fact, Conger even states at the beginning of her book that its release is intended to dispel the negative historical narrative being presented about Cixi by other authors.

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<sup>17</sup> Sarah Conger, *Letters from China; With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 2012). 376.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

*Court Life in China*, written in 1909 by Isaac Headland, is another first-hand account of the Qing dynasty's court life and the relationships developed between Chinese and Westerners. Reverend Headland and his wife Mariam Sinclair Headland M.D. traveled to China with a missionary group, where Dr. Headland became the Professor of Hygiene at Peking University, providing her access to common and court women. Dr. Headland contributed to Isaac



Figure 6 Yu Xunling. *The Princess Der Ling in Evening Costume*. early 1900s. black and white photographic print. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian, Washington D.C.

Headland's book, lending yet another positive view of the Qing court. Mariam Headland was a good friend of Sarah Conger and frequented the Qing court as Conger's interpreter, allowing her to be a unique witness to historical events.

Der Ling, an interpreter for Cixi during her interactions with Western women, wrote seven books about her time with the Empress Dowager as a means of presenting a more intimate portrayal of a woman so few really knew. *Two Years at the Forbidden City*, was published in 1909, recounting the years she lived at the palace. Ling's work has been brought to question by historians because of her claim that she was ethnically Manchu, when in reality she was actually Han, and because she claimed Cixi titled her "princess" within the palace walls, a title never formally recognized because she was not of royal blood. Regardless of these allegations, Der Ling's accounts are similar to others who were in the palace at the same time. Not being seen as totally Chinese and not totally Western, Ling's interpretation lends yet another unique and thought provoking aspect to Cixi's life.

In more recent works, Sterling Seagrave's 1992 book, *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China*, weaves together a thorough portrayal of Cixi's life.

Seagrave holds a relatively objective perspective of Cixi, but tracks the evolution of the slander of her name and character. He analyzes previously overlooked primary sources and challenges Backhouse's original biography. Seagrave says, "Getting at the truth about Tzu Hsi is like removing overlays from a painting to restore the original; truth emerges little by little" which shows how long it took for a substantial shift of perception to occur in the general historical narrative about Cixi.<sup>19</sup>

The most progressive positive written biography was by Jung Chang in 2013. *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* encompasses all the research from the previously mentioned authors. Chang is not a historian, but a biographer; her work reads like a novel, but is laced with a huge number of historical facts and a comprehensive bibliography. The majority of her sources were not released to the public until after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 when the Chinese national archives were reopened. About Cixi, Chang says: "Few of her achievements have been recognized and when they are the credit is invariably given to the men serving her. This is largely due to a basic handicap: that she was a woman and could only rule in the name of her sons—so her precise role has been little known."<sup>20</sup>

With the biographical works being so diverse, and at times convoluted, it is understandable how the historical description about Cixi has taken so long to transform into an unbiased narrative. By examining the negative, positive and in between works, a more complete explanation of the Empress's personality and actions leads to a more factual description.

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<sup>19</sup> Sterling Seagrave, *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). 16.

<sup>20</sup> Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). 373.

## Historical Sources

Historical reference books examine the amazingly tumultuous situations the Qing court faced before and during the early part of the nineteenth century. Without these references there is no possibility of encapsulating China's dire circumstances at that time. However, as the decades pass, a study of the historical narrative of events occurring during Cixi's life begins to lend to the necessity of adjust the biographical description.

In 1915, Paul Clements wrote a comprehensive study about the diplomatic and political aspects of the Boxer Revolution in *The Boxer Revolution*. Prior mention of the facts about the Boxer Rebellion tended to be very negative and did not usually include analysis showing the rationale behind actions of the Qing dynasty to retain its antiquity, or international complications that arose from foreign conquest.<sup>21</sup> Instead of placing all blame on Cixi and the Qing dynasty, Clements cites primary sources such as consular notes and treaty agreements, producing an uncommonly well-rounded book about the Boxer Rebellion and the events that occurred.

Meribeth Cameron's *The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912* appeared in 1931. Her work was more fact-based than previous books written about Cixi's reforms. Cameron's focus is based on the critical years before the collapse of the dynasty and whether the effort asserted to discover the imperial protestations were sincere, to what degree they were preformed, if the realization failed of realization, what reasons were responsible for that failure."<sup>22</sup> As long as the imperial leadership remained intact, China enjoyed a measure of peace and order, while new ideas and institutions were explored. Cameron writes that after Cixi's death, the Qing dynasty lacked leadership and was unsuccessful at winning back support from the Chinese people,

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Clements, *The Boxer Rebellion A Political and Diplomatic Review* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co. Agents, 1915). 7.

<sup>22</sup> Meribeth Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912* (New York: Octagon Books Inc, 1963). 5.

leading to revolution. Cameron claims another one to two decades of Qing dynastic leadership, might have eased China's transition from old to new.<sup>23</sup> Her view is an obvious reversal from previous interpretations of how the dynasty handled reform. It does not deny the Qing dynasty leaders struggled for control, but instead insists they really were attempting to change the government's direction and that Cixi was an integral part of this change.

Written in 1936, regarding the events of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, *The Flight of an Empress* by K'un Liu explain Manchu blunders and foreigner challenges in late nineteenth century China. This book is based on a conversation Liu had with Yung Wu, a scholar-official during Cixi's reign. Wu recounts the Qing dynasty's inevitable decline of competent leadership, including Cixi's leadership. Wu, however, suggests that Cixi was heavily influenced by men in her council regarding foreigners and Boxer leader legitimacy. He says also that the counsel purposely misguided Cixi's knowledge about war because they did not want to upset her.<sup>24</sup> This book showed the negative biases many men had about Cixi during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how their opinions of Cixi's incompetency impacted several years of the historical narrative.

Norbert Meienberger wrote in a 1980 monograph, *The Emergence of Constitutional Government in China (1905-1908): The Concept Sanctioned by the Empress Dowager Tzu-Hsi* where he argues that Cixi and the Qing government reform efforts had been overly criticized, and the full intent of the government's circumstances were not considered. Meienberger agrees with Meribeth Cameron's book *The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912* and her perception regarding Cixi's efforts were earnest, but failed due to corruption and exaggerated ideas about

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>24</sup> K'un Lui, *The Flight of an Empress* (United States: Yale University Press, 1936). 13-15.

the West.<sup>25</sup> Meienberger provides a new point of view, departing from traditional research, which suggested the Qing dynasty did not want to give up the monarchy, rather to blend Cixi's monarchy with a constitution and parliament, showing the progressively changing historical perception.<sup>26</sup>

*The Great Chinese Revolution: 1800-1985*, written by John King Fairbank in 1986, shows a different view of the Qing court during Cixi's reign. Fairbank's demonstrates how the historical view had begun to change, and that other issues such as race and corrupt officials were being recognized as possible influencers in how decisions were made and for what reasons. This is significant because it allows the historical narrative to finally accept that Cixi's ethnicity was a contributing factor in how the Qing government was seen by other government officials that were not in the inner circle of the Qing court.

Zhan Zhang's 2010 paper *Cixi and Modernization of China* briefly explains the two phases of modernization in China during Cixi's time era. The first stage about the Westernization Movement, was guided by the ideology that China needed to mimic Western political reform regarding the economic, military, culture and education. The second phase was the Development Stage where China was supposed to implement reform about politics, economy, military, culture and education. Zhang recognizes that the Qing Dynasty was:

Heavily damaged, and was full of domestic strife and foreign aggression. Corruption of the royal family and encroachment of foreign countries, together with resistance by the Han people against Manchu rule, made the Empress

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<sup>25</sup> Meribeth Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912* (New York: Octagon Books Inc, 1963). 5.

<sup>26</sup> Norbert Meienberger, *The Emergence of Constitutional Government in China (1905-1908): The Concept Sanctioned by the Empress Dowager Tzu-Hsi* (Las Vegas: Herbert Lang & Cie AG, 1980). 29-31.

Dowager come to realize if she wanted to defend her people and the dynasty, there had to be one more powerful than her husband to operate the rider.<sup>27</sup>

Zhang's piece clearly shows progressive changes to the historical narrative as more evidence is examined. Zhang also states Cixi's faults, such as her ignorance about worldly affairs, made reforming Chinese society difficult. He suggests that these deficits made reforming China's feudal society difficult, Zhang suggests the actual role Cixi played in changing China was very limited."<sup>28</sup>

These sources span nearly a century, identifying themes from biographical sources, both primary and secondary, and historical, as well as influential sources explaining the rationale behind the historically dominant negative image of Cixi. With the exception of Clements and Cameron (being historically ahead of the curve) in research style, the majority of the books in each category would appear to follow a normal evolution of the historical truth behind a controversial character. The research becomes more complete and less biased as new historians try to enhance the previous authors' works and find more evidence to strengthen their theses. The role of Cixi as a woman steadily moves forward as the source dates jump through history, reevaluating the negative impact previous authors believed to be true, based on the archaic notions of a male dominated society. The evidence definitely has become stronger and more complex through the years, and these are welcome changes to previously biased view of the Empress Dowager. This paper will investigate the gap in the available literature about why Cixi felt the need to sidestep her own government officials to seek out information from Western women.

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<sup>27</sup> Zhan Zhang, "Cixi and the Modernization of China," *Asian Social Science*, Vol. 6, no. 4 (2010): 154-155.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

## Late Qing Challenges

For over 400 years aggressive European imperialism had flourished around the world, but not until England won a devastating victory over China—the great sleeping dragon—during the first Opium War of 1842 that East Asia came to feel Imperialism’s blunt reality. England’s victory caused a domino reaction in other Western countries such as France, Germany, Russia and the United States, all of whom began to flood China’s gates in an attempt to gain a “slice of the melon,”<sup>29</sup> upon realizing China’s weakened position. The goal of imperialistic ventures was purely financial exploitation and to a lesser degree modernization, technology transfer, infrastructure bolstering, and nationalism.<sup>30</sup> Western nations had been trying to breach the walls of China since implementing many isolationist policies during the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century. With its large population of untapped Chinese customers and the Western consumer market requiring particular goods, China was seen as worth the effort despite the Qing dynasty’s resistance.

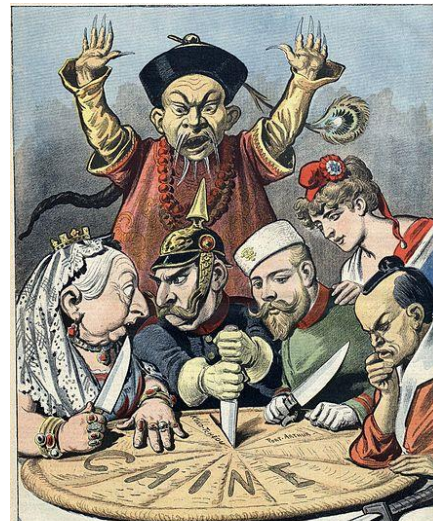


Figure 7 "China -- the cake of kings and... of emperors". A pastry represents "Chine" (French for China) is being divided between caricatures of Queen Victoria of the United Kingdom, William II of Germany , Nicholas II of Russia, the French Marianne, and a samurai representing Japan. 1898. Color drawing. French political cartoon.

The Western view of China was, “sprawling, crowded, and publicly unclean,” Westerners imagined it as a civilization that was “obviously ‘medieval’ and consequently ‘backward’.”<sup>31</sup> Chinese society’s little capacity for change, was seen as a direct reflection of Cixi and the Qing

<sup>29</sup> Dr. Mary Hanneman, personal communication, March 2016.

<sup>30</sup> John Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1085* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987). 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

dynasty which fueled the notions that China and Cixi were weak and vulnerable. The negative perception of China as a country led to a feeling of superiority and subsequent discrimination against the Chinese people by the rest of the world. This was obvious through the West's attitudes surrounding the economy, immigration, and cultural insensitivity toward religion and values.

Chinese people call their country Zhongguo 中国, literally "Middle Kingdom." The name is well earned and very justifiable to the Chinese, because for centuries they ruled their portion of the world which they saw as the center of everything. China was able to stay isolated because of its self-sufficient ways and a large population of willing workers. Because of this mindset the Chinese felt any encroachment into China was ridiculous. What could the West bring to China that they didn't already have? China saw trade as unnecessary because the West didn't produce anything China desired, with the exception of silver. On the contrary, China produced many items Westerners desired such as tea, silk and porcelain. With this invincible mindset the Chinese found it difficult to understand the concept of the Western empires imperialist ideals.

England, inspired by economic advancement, was determined to break through China's isolationism. The demand for Chinese goods was very real and the English populace was willing to pay. The Qing dynasty agreed to trade, but only for silver. The English were unwilling to exchange silver for tea because it seemed to the British that it was an uneven trade. However, England's quest for imperialistic control would make China bend to its demands by whatever means necessary. This could explain one of the reasons why England



Figure 8 Johnathan Lewy. *The British Influencing the Chinese During the Opium War*. black and white ink drawing. Available from: *The American Opium Trade*.

turned to the sale of opium in China. The Chinese felt opium was a way to control the Chinese populace, by slowly weakening the heart of China by disabling its people. If a war was waged and won over the control of China's trade industry it would enforce England's political dominance over the Emperor and the Qing court, allowing equal opportunity for trade in the way the English desired. The success of the Opium War (1839-42) led to an overwhelming victory and free trade for the English while the Chinese were left paying massive indemnities and unequal treaties that opened China's gates to the world.

After a devastating loss, China was weak and desperately wanted to regain the sanctity of its culture and past glory. However, China was forced to now give concessions to England and any other country who wanted to be included in the economic benefits of having "friendly" relations. As foreigners began to flood into China they began to slowly assert power over Chinese lives, business, religion and culture which infuriating many Chinese. To add even more stress to the situation, many government officials felt that if the long line of dynastic rulers was disturbed and its sovereignty challenged, everything China stood for would be no more. This triggered power struggles between the Chinese and foreign invaders for the next sixty years.

The Qing government was struggling as well, with three schools of thought dividing the policy makers. The first was to stick with old traditions and shrink from the enemy, a concept allowed for no improvement through Western models. Chinese ways had worked for a long time, and they wanted to stick with what worked. The second idea was to make necessary reforms for a more modern society, but reject foreign interference. The third idea was a willingness to adapt to Western ways so that moral and material progress was guaranteed.<sup>32</sup> According to Henry Blake, the Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875-1908) was a proponent of the third idea, as he was

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Blake, "The Rule of the Empress Dowager" *Living Age* vol. 260, issue 3366 (1909): 70.

thoroughly dismayed with the life he led as a royal, and desired a more normal existence away from the captivity of his own position.<sup>33</sup> Many of his Western ideas were acknowledged by the Empress Dowager, but the Emperor became too heavily influenced by his personal advisors, and began drafting formal decrees of anti-dynastic ideals such as adopting Western attire and cutting off the traditional male queue which was seen as a badge of submission and loyalty to the Qing court.<sup>34</sup> The radical ideas of the young Emperor and his advisors to eliminate the monarchy went against everything the Qing dynasty represented. Realizing these decrees would affect the entire administration, as well as the Chinese people, Cixi stifled Guangxu's control. Cixi's primary goal was to maintain the dynasty as her ancestors had done before her, and to create reform that would enhance the Chinese, with Western influence injected when needed. Basically, Cixi wanted to have the best of both worlds.

### **Cutting off Western Head and Then Inviting Them to Tea**

One of the watershed events of the late 1800s is the Boxer Rebellion, where peasants, inspired by anti-foreign sentiment, engaged in violent confrontations to oust foreigners. This included the Qing Empire controlled by ethnic Manchu, a group of nomadic people who had invaded China in the 1600s, overtaking the Ming Dynasty. At first the Empress Dowager Cixi saw the Boxer Rebellion as an advantage to furthering a closer unity between the Han and Manchu, believing that the enemy of her enemy was her friend. She decided to promote excessive violent behavior and offered to pay anyone who was able to bring a "western" head to the Forbidden City for financial compensation. This was a reenactment of what she had witnessed her own husband, Emperor Xianfeng, do during the invasion of Peking in 1860, where

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 69.

the sacking and burning of the Summer Palace occurred.<sup>35</sup> This led to a 55 day siege in Peking where Westerners defended themselves in their legation headquarters. The Boxers not only fought the Westerners but anyone who supported them, which included civilians and rebels, forcing the Qing court and government officials to flee to the safety of a distant town.

Eventually, the siege ended and the remaining rebels went home, leaving the Qing officials in an uncomfortable position of having supported a cause that not only failed but left the enemy enraged. The Qing dynasty, realizing that change would now be inevitable, and returned to Peking to begin improving relations with the Westerners. Cixi began removing government officials that were unsupportive of Westernization and began the long process of engaging the West.

### **Relationships with Western Women**

January 1902, after the Boxer Rebellion subsided, Cixi, her nephew the Emperor, and all the court officials returned to Peking. The Western foreign ministers and their wives greeted the party at the train stations, where Cixi made special efforts to acknowledge the foreign minister's



Figure 9 *Westerners Invited to the Palace after the Boxer Uprising*. Early 1900s. black and white photographic print. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian, Washington D.C.

wives in attendance. In an attempt to win back Western favor, Cixi wooed specific influential diplomats. The women present that day would later be welcomed into her inner cohort. However, Cixi's efforts dismayed the Chinese citizens in attendance, who felt this behavior was breaking from the rigid and predictable Royal Chinese tradition. The fact that she appeared to nearly

<sup>35</sup> Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). 29.

kowtow to the foreigners, whom the Chinese believed had no place being in Peking, was an even greater affront to their country and dignity.<sup>36</sup>

### **Locations and Methods of meetings**

Despite the incident at the train station, Cixi was normally a staunch advocate of maintaining and preserving the Dynastic way. In fact, when foreign dignitaries visited they would first have to show their credentials at the side gate (nobody went through the front gate except the Empress Dowager), and then be escorted into the main throne room for formal introductions. Once this was complete, the visitors would be escorted to another room for lunch. Men and women always had their own days to be received by the Majesties, with the exception of Cixi who was the only female joining the men. It was standard protocol that no one ever ate a meal with Cixi or the Emperor, which implied that the guests would dine with only lesser Princes, Princesses and court officials. However, if an interesting female guest captured Cixi's attention, she would invite that women to her private quarters for additional conversation and entertainment. There Cixi was able to be less formal and rigid, and she felt inclined to talk more openly with her guests.<sup>37</sup>

Sarah Conger, never wanted to take advantage of her proximity to Cixi with questions or requests from others, was very cautious with her discourse and how she engaged the Empress Dowager. However, in January 1902, she was inclined to break from her normal customs to make a personal request about a topic she felt very strongly about. On that particular visit Cixi had invited the women from the Legation to her private quarters where Conger took the opportunity to speak more candidly. She spoke to the Empress Dowager about an experience of

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<sup>36</sup> Meribeth Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912* (New York: Octagon Books Inc, 1931). 60.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Conger, *Letters from China: With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 2012). 244.

visiting and observing a Chinese boys school, saying “Such bright boys will be a power in their honorable country. As foreigners are with you, if some of your ablest youth could be educated abroad as well as at home, would it not enable them to meet and understand the incoming ideas?”<sup>38</sup> Cixi agreed by saying, “They shall be sent abroad.” A few days later on February 1, 1902, an edict was released by Cixi stating

Our international relations are of the utmost importance. At the present time when we are seeking to restore prosperity to the people and the Government, we ought more than ever to gather together those of superior merit. If those who go abroad will devote themselves earnestly to the investigation of foreign methods of government and the sciences of those countries, we may hope to increase our talents as in some measure to meet the needs of the Government...<sup>39</sup>

Conger then states that she was not sure if what she said had any impact on the decision made by the Empress Dowager, but regardless, at their next meeting she expressed her thanks. At this meeting Conger seems to have been gathering her momentum for speaking to Cixi about governmental reform. She chooses to discuss Cixi’s edict on foot binding, wondering if it would have an immediate effect, which Cixi said “No, because the Chinese move slowly. Our customs are so fixed that it takes much time to change them.”<sup>40</sup> Cixi was not opposed to Western style reform in regards to education or foot binding. She was very aware that no matter how hard she wanted to reverse foot binding, the Chinese would not obey her edicts because she was a Manchu woman.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 254.

Cixi, famous for presenting small gifts to those she liked, would often give figures made of jade, and baskets full of fresh fruit; as a means of showing her genuine interests in the Western women she met. In fact, the foreign legation representatives did not know how to respond to Cixi's gift giving, so she was asked to refrain from gifting. However, being generous was in her nature as suggested by the Western women as well as Der Ling on many occasions, and so as not to offend the foreigners she did not know very well, she obliged the legations' request, but continued to generously gift the Western women whom she liked and who understood she was sincerely being thoughtful.

### **Motivation for a Relationship**

At the beginning of 1902, it was very clear that Cixi was motivated to meet Western dignitaries, initially as a means of "making nice" with those whose governments were clearly stronger than her own.<sup>41</sup> This was purely a self-preservation tactic, and rightly so, China had not done well in defending itself over the previous 65 years. Everything China had known and wanted to maintain was being ripped away by foreign interests. The possibility of a full revolt from the Chinese people was also very real and Cixi sought to find a happy medium. The only way to stop the hemorrhaging of Chinese ways was to initiate reform that would enhance the Chinese lifestyle, and would include modern Western enhancements.

Cixi was a very intelligent woman with exceptionally keen observation skills and an attention to detail.<sup>42</sup> Even though many of the comments made by the author Der Ling have been questioned over their authenticity, something in her commentary with considering is her repeated mention that Cixi found the Western women interesting. Whether it be their strange clothing

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<sup>41</sup> Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1911). 83.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

with small waistlines that looked particularly uncomfortable, or their eye color and large feet, Cixi was interested and found them startling.<sup>43</sup> It was a curiosity in how her contemporaries lived abroad, a fascination with something so different from what she was, that Cixi chose to use her inquisitiveness about the Western women to help understand Western ways.

### **Developing a feasible rational for blending cultures**

It behooved Cixi to rationalize blending Western and Chinese ways in the Chinese society, as well as with the Qing dynasty court. Since her main goal was to preserve China, finding a way to do all of this was very important. One example of Cixi's willingness to find a favorable blend of East and West was with her interpreter Der Ling.

Cixi especially seemed to enjoy having women like Der Ling, her mother, and sister, in her company when Westerners would visit, because not only could they converse in Chinese, but in English and French as well. They would also wear Western garb around the palace, per Cixi



Figure 11 Yu Xunling, *Empress Dowager and her Attendants* Der Ling (left), Ron Ling (right), 1903. black and white photographic print. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

request, because the Empress found their clothes intriguing.<sup>44</sup> This suggests that even though Cixi strongly enforced Chinese tradition, she definitely did not reject Western ways. Sarah Conger even mentions how Cixi was beginning to learn some English,<sup>45</sup> which seems totally unnecessary because she had many interpreters at her disposal who spoke English for her. This suggests, yet again, Cixi's

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Conger, *Letters from China: With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China*. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co, 2012). 224.

growing desire to understand and create a better relationship with her Western acquaintances by showing an interest in Western ways. For years after the Boxer Rebellion she entertained Westerners, encouraging her court ladies to also befriend Westerners, even permitting Western painter Katherine Carl to live within the palace walls. Carl spent nearly every day while in China by Cixi's side, sketching, painting, and sharing a joy of beautiful things with the Empress Dowager. When Carl showed an interest in learning to speak Chinese, Cixi encouraged it and made sure that Carl was taught by the Emperor's wife to ensure she was taught properly.<sup>46</sup>

### Sidestepping Advisors

Multiple governing factions within the Qing court, held differing ideas on how to run the Chinese government and how reform should occur. Some Chinese wanted a full integration of Western and Chinese ways, but this would require a constitutional monarchy. Another point of view was to remove Cixi and restore full leadership control to the Emperor only, the intention being that the Emperor was more willing to change (or be manipulated depending on how this idea was viewed). On the Conservative side, the main goal was to maintain the Dynasty and to remove all foreigners from within the Chinese borders.

Cixi knew many Qing officials were opposed to her ideas about a constitutional monarchy, because of their relentless attempts to thwart her ideas as she proposed them. Unfortunately, because she was constantly surrounded by eunuchs, female servants, and

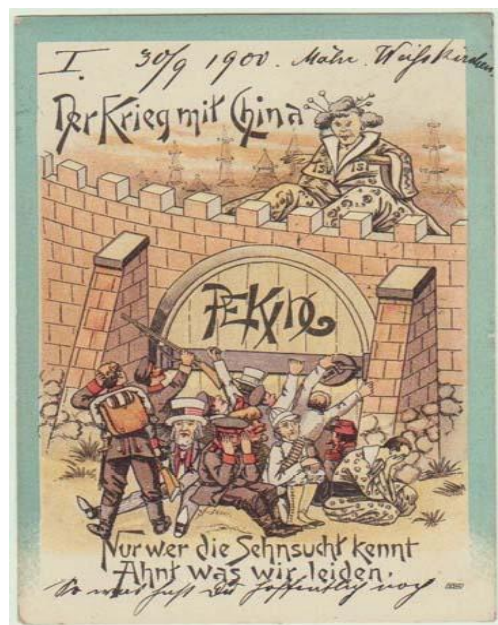


Figure 12 *The War with China*, signed September 30, 1900. color lithograph. Postcard sent from Weissenkirchen to Wolfsburg in Carynthia, Germany.

<sup>46</sup> Katherine Carl, "A Personal Estimate of the Character of the Late Empress Dowager, Tze-Hsi" *The Journal of Race Development* Vol 4, No 1 (1913): 68.

male officials she rarely had refuge from their eavesdropping, except when she went to her personal chambers. That is when Cixi had privacy, well more than what she normally had. In her private chambers she would only allow a few female servants and her favorite eunuchs to attend to her more personal needs.

As stated earlier, it was also in her private chambers, while entertaining female guests, that she would be able to let her formalities relax. Women such as Sarah Conger and other wives of foreign dignitaries would be able to talk and express themselves, sometimes over tea, while no Qing government official was present. These conversations were considered off-record, and other than personal correspondence, such as what Conger wrote to her friends and family, there is no evidence that these discussions occurred.

However, noting the way the European women, excluding Conger and a few others, reacted when face to face with the Empress, it is very possible that ideas of reform were exchanged. Moreover, Conger was not the only woman in China eager to alleviate the issues between countries.

In 1905, Katherine Carl even wrote about how European women behaved when in close proximity to the Empress Dowager. She observed the women constantly jockeyed for an opportunity to be heard or to be close to Cixi, causing cordial garden parties to become quite unpleasant. The ladies of



Figure 14 *Imperial Portrait of The Empress Dowager*, early 1900s. oil on canvas. The National Museums of Asian Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.

the Legation watched each other closely with “a jealous eye, in constant fear that some one might overstep her place”.<sup>47</sup> Were they merely paranoid someone would “over-step” socially acceptable boundaries, or had someone been courageous enough on previous visits to actually approach the Empress Dowager about political issues?

A second more substantial piece of evidence regarding women from the East and West having friendly relation comes from Sarah Conger. Her husband was the U.S. ambassador to China from January 1898 to April 1905, and because of this distinction the Congers would constantly be in the business of receiving important people at their home. Sarah was known as a gracious hostess to whoever came to her door. Due to her constant desire to be in good relations with the Chinese, she would host tiffins and tea parties in her home for high ranking European and Chinese alike whenever they would come to call. It was because of these interactions that Conger began to find commonalities that she made known to her Chinese counterparts.<sup>48</sup> During one of these gatherings, a curious American admiral (unnamed by Conger) asked Sarah about



Figure 13 John Tenniel, *In the Movement* “Shifting Her Capital?” 1900. black and white drawing. From: *Punch Magazine*.

conversations she usually had with local Chinese women, saying “What do you ladies talk about—dress and jewels?”<sup>49</sup> As Sarah was about to respond to the question, her husband, replied for her. “Quite the contrary. They talk about the Manchurian troubles, political questions, and many things

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah Conger. *Letters from China: With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China*. (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 2012). 294.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

pertaining to their Government.” Sarah next writes that she is grateful to her husband, because coming from him, the information was that much more substantial to the admiral.<sup>50</sup> This may not directly link Conger and Cixi in the same statement, however considering that Conger did converse with Cixi about reform issues, it is likely that more political discussions probably occurred. Was it is within these female only environments that the women so commonly overlooked by the societal norms were able to use the conventional Confucius misogynistic mindset against those who were determined to not blend Western and Chinese ways? It is also possible these women used sexism to their advantage. The American admiral couldn’t have been the only male in China who thought a woman’s conversation could never go beyond dresses and jewelry. It is then feasible to consider that while in her private quarter, away from the prying eyes of so many who wished to destroy her, Cixi may have been able to sidestepping her corrupt government officials. All the while gathering her own intelligence from discussions with the foreign women that she felt would be advantageous for China growth.

### Preservation of Empire

Cixi’s saw the past mistakes of former Qing emperors including her own husband, as being counterproductive to relationships with the Western countries. She felt that being stubbornly resistant to change was stupid and wrong.<sup>51</sup> However, as the ruling



Figure 15 Charles Lucien Léandre, *Empress Dowager of China*, 1900. color engraving. Front Cover of *Le Rire*.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>51</sup> Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013). 35.

Empress, she faced scrutiny from her own Conservative counsel, as well as from those in her government who were fervently against reform. Cixi's main goal was to preserve the Qing dynasty, and the past efforts of those who had lead before her had done the opposite.<sup>52</sup> However, changing China to be completely like the West was not appropriate either. Cixi was constantly firing corrupt government officials that she felt were too strongly supportive of being too traditional or too progressive. She was not trusting of those who were closest to her, and struggled to acquire government officials who were unbiased and more likely to allow her additional freedom in her decision-making. In the summer of 1908, despite suffering diminishing health, Cixi began issuing decrees with the intent of the eventual creation of a constitutional monarchy for China. This was done by endorsing a constitutional draft, authorizing election regulations and establishing a nine year time frame for the creation of a parliament.<sup>53</sup>

Cixi passed away November 15, 1908 less than twenty-four hours after the young Emperor died. Knowing she was about to die, Cixi had the Guangxu Emperor poisoned with a fatal amount of arsenic—ensuring he would not outlive her and surrender China to the Japanese—instead crowning a great-nephew as the new Emperor.<sup>54</sup> Emperor Puyi was two months shy of his third birthday when the Empress Dowager died. The death of Cixi caused China to flounder even more than it had been. Without Cixi to keep the corrupt government officials away, the Qing court was overrun with many wanting to usurp the power of the newly crowned boy Emperor. Cixi's dying wishes had been for China to retain the monarchy, for the Chinese people to be able to vote and for China to have a Western model parliament.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 367.

The Western powers were not backing away from China, adding to an already unstable environment. In 1911, the Qing dynasty formally fell, forcing Puyi to abdicate, ending thousands of years of dynastic rule in China. No strong leadership emerged with the capability to control the country as it exploded. Overrun with warlords, China descending into forty more years of war. In 1949, Mao Zedong pushed the Kuomintang leadership out of China and into Taiwan, finally calming China's seizures with the establishment of the People's Republic of China.

### **Conclusion**

Historians have projected a frustratingly negative image of the Empress Dowager, portraying her as a controlling, murderous obstacle to reform. Cixi faced insurmountable odds becoming the ruler of China. She struggled with a number of factors which complicated her authority, such as; race, gender, age, lack of a higher education, corrupt officials and a closed off dynastic lifestyle. Somehow, she managed to not only survive but thrive. She kept China afloat through a number of very difficult circumstances until her death. Much has been written about Cixi, most have been interpreted as showing a vile, power hungry woman hell-bent on making China dance to the beat of her drum, but it is possible the evidence has not been considered objectively and fairly.

Historical evidence has shown Cixi's relationships with Western women helped to inspire and influence the changing Chinese government of the early twentieth century. Through her unassuming social gatherings with select women, she obtained pertinent information about the West, without being influenced by the official Confucian bureaucracy that surrounded her. This information helped influence Chinese modernization which encompassed both Western and Chinese styles. A comprehensive, objective investigation of all documentation about China's Qing court in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries will help scholars understand the complexities of what took place under the Dowager Empress's rule. However, the historical

image of Cixi has been so damaged throughout the last century that it is questionable whether a more positive conclusion would be accepted.



Figure 16 *Legend of Korra*. Season 3. The Earth Queen Hou-Ting, inspired by Cixi, color drawing. Aired on Nick Jr. TV. 2014.

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