



The Dragon Lady of China (1835-1908)

In Brief

In 1852, Cixi, around 16 years old, was chosen as a concubine for Emperor Xianfeng and entered the Forbidden City as "Noble Lady Lan," a year after Emperor Xianfeng ascended to

the throne in 1851; her status dramatically increased in 1856 when she gave birth to the emperor's only surviving son, the Tongzhi Emperor, leading her to become a favoured Consort and gain influence by assisting the ailing emperor (who is only age 25 at the time) with administrative tasks.

Empress Dowager Cixi, *as Tongzhi's mother and Guangxu's aunt, she effectively controlled the Qing government for 47 years. Her decisions significantly impacted the dynasty's trajectory.*

Prince Gong (Yixin): *Xianfeng's brother, played a crucial role in Qing politics, particularly during the Tongzhi Restoration. He helped Empress Dowager Cixi in the coup against the regents appointed by Emperor Xianfeng before he died.*

Emperor Xianfeng's Second Son (Posthumously created as Prince Min): *Born in 1859, this son was not named and died on the same day he was born.*

Princess Rong'an, *daughter of Xianfeng and Noble Consort Zhuangjing born 1855 and according to official record she suffered a miscarriage and died before she reached age 20 in 1875*

Emperor Tongzhi (Zaichun), *the sole surviving son of Xianfeng, became emperor at the young age of five. His death at 18 without children led to an unprecedented succession. Zaitian, his double first cousin, was chosen as the Guangxu Emperor, a decision influenced by Empress Dowager Cixi, deviating from Qing dynasty tradition.*

The Narratives

Empress Dowager Cixi remains one of the most controversial figures in Chinese history. Ruling behind the throne for nearly half a century, from 1861 to 1908, a period of immense internal upheaval and foreign encroachment. Some view her as a ruthless despot who clung to power at the expense of modernisation, while others see her as a pragmatic leader who did her best to preserve the Qing Dynasty in impossible circumstances. Regardless of one's interpretation, Cixi's impact on the trajectory of late imperial China is undeniable.

Cixi's rise from a low-ranking concubine to Emperor Xianfeng 咸豐 (1831-1861) into a position of immense power within the Forbidden City is a noteworthy example of cunning and manipulation. It's also possible that she benefited from a hidden network, similar to how local bandits require resources to become organised. After the Emperor's death, she orchestrated a coup with the help of Prince Gong, seizing power from the regents appointed by the late emperor to rule for her young son, the Emperor Tongzhi 同治 (1856-1875) and later her nephew, the Emperor Guangxu 光緒 (1871-1908).

Cixi, ruling as Empress Dowager, initially behind a screen and later in her own name, had a reign of successes and failures, overseeing the Tongzhi Restoration but also China's defeat in the **first Sino-Japanese War** and the **Boxer Rebellion**. Her

legacy is complex, a woman of power in a patriarchal society, a shrewd political operator who maintained control in a turbulent era, initially supporting modernisation such as the **Self-Strengthening Movement** but later becoming more conservative, particularly after suppressing the **Hundred Days' Reform**. Cixi's actions had both positive and negative consequences for China, criticised for extravagance and opposition to reform but also overseeing relative stability and economic growth, remaining a figure of intense debate in Chinese history.

Post Scriptum

The Self-Strengthening Movement 自強運動 (1851-1895), was spearheaded by Empress Dowager Cixi and aimed to modernise the country's military and economy to counter foreign influence. This period saw the adoption of western technologies and industrial practices, with a focus on building modern arsenals, shipyards, and infrastructure. Despite initial successes, the movement was hampered by bureaucratic corruption, a lack of central coordination, and resistance from conservative elements within the government who feared the erosion of traditional values. The ultimate failure to fully modernise left China vulnerable to further foreign encroachment in the late 19th century.

The First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), fought between the Qing dynasty of China and **Meiji Japan**, marked a significant turning point in East Asian power dynamics.

Japan's modernised military, modelled after Western forces, decisively defeated the Qing navy and army. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which concluded the war, forced China to cede Taiwan, the Pescadores Islands 澎湖(Penghu), and the Liaodong Peninsula 遼東半島(Dalian, Port Arthur) to Japan, as well as grant Japan trading rights and a large indemnity. This victory established Japan as a major power on the world stage and exposed the Qing dynasty's weakness, further fuelling foreign imperialism in China and contributing to internal unrest, such as the Boxer Rebellion. The war's outcome had lasting consequences, shaping the geopolitical landscape of East Asia for decades to come.

Hundred days' Reform (1898). The Empress Dowager Cixi's Hundred Days' Reform was a brief period of reform in China in 1898. It was initiated by the Guangxu Emperor, who, influenced by reformist officials like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, aimed to modernise China's government, economy, and education system. The reforms included establishing a modern education system, promoting industrial development, and reorganising the military. However, the reforms were short-lived, as conservative officials within the Qing court, led by Empress Dowager Cixi, opposed the changes. Cixi launched a coup, imprisoned the Guangxu Emperor, and rescinded the reforms after only 100 days. The failure of the Hundred Days' Reform marked a setback for the modernisation movement in China and solidified Cixi's control over the Qing government.

The Boxer Rebellion 義和團運動 (1899-1901), also known as the Boxer Uprising, was an anti-foreign, anti-colonial, and anti-Christian uprising that took place in China between 1899 and 1901, towards the end of the Qing dynasty. It was initiated by the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, known as the "Boxers" in English because many of their members had practiced Chinese martial arts, also referred to as "shadowboxing". The Boxers were motivated by proto-nationalist sentiments and opposition to foreign imperialism and Christian missionaries. The uprising took place against a background of severe drought and economic disruption.

The rebellion began in the Shandong province and rapidly spread to Beijing. In June 1900, the Boxers, convinced they were invincible to foreign weapons, converged on Beijing with the slogan "Support the Qing court and exterminate the foreigners." Foreign legations in Beijing came under siege, and an international force was formed to protect foreign nationals and suppress the rebellion. This force, composed of troops from eight nations, including Japan, Russia, Great Britain, France, the United States, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, fought its way to Beijing and relieved the siege.

The Boxer Protocol, signed in 1901, officially ended the rebellion. China was forced to pay a large indemnity to the foreign powers, and additional concessions were granted to foreigners. The rebellion had profound and long-lasting consequences for China. The Qing dynasty was severely weakened, and the rebellion contributed to the growth of

Chinese nationalism. It also led to increased foreign intervention in China, which further eroded Chinese sovereignty.

The Wuchang Uprising, Xinhai Revolution 辛亥革命(1911-1912), also known as the Chinese Revolution, marked the end of the Qing dynasty, the last imperial dynasty of China, and the establishment of the Republic of China. It was the culmination of a series of uprisings and revolts against the Qing court, fuelled by widespread discontent with its corruption, incompetence, and failure to modernise the country. The revolution was led by revolutionaries such as Sun Yat-sen, who advocated for a republican government and sought to overthrow the Qing dynasty. The revolution began with the Wuchang Uprising on October 10, 1911, and quickly spread throughout the country, leading to the abdication of the last emperor, Puyi, on February 12, 1912. The Xinhai Revolution, ushering in a new era of political and social change and paving the way for the rise of modern China.