



# Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China

*Jung Chang*

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## **Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China Jung Chang**

A woman, an Empress of immense wealth who was largely a prisoner within the compound walls of her palaces, a mother, a ruthless enemy, and a brilliant strategist: Chang makes a compelling case that Cixi was one of the most formidable and enlightened rulers of any nation. Cixi led an intense and singular life. Chosen at the age of 12 to be a concubine by the Emperor Xianfeng, she gave birth to his only male heir who at four was designated Emperor when his father died in 1861. In a brilliant move, the young woman enlisted the help of the Emperor's widow and the two women orchestrated a coup that ousted the regents and made Cixi sole Regent. Untrained and untaught, the two studied history and politics together, ruling the huge nation from behind a curtain. When her boy died, Cixi designated a young nephew as Emperor, continuing her reign till her death in 1908. Chang gives us a complex, riveting portrait of Cixi through a reign as long as that of her fellow Empress, Victoria, whom she longed to meet: her ruthlessness in fighting off rivals; her curiosity to learn; her reliance on Westerners who she placed in key positions; and her sensitivity and desire to preserve the distinctiveness of China's past while overturning traditions (she, as Chang reveals--not Mao, as he claimed--banned footbinding) and exposing its culture to western ideas and technology.

## **Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China Details**

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## From Reader Review Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China for online ebook

### Siria says

Jung Chang's biography of the Empress Cixi is a fascinating look at a period of history about which I know very little. As I'm not familiar with the existing historiography, I don't know to what extent exactly this is a revisionist biography—certainly, if Chang's characterisation of previous historical works on Cixi is true, then this is a swing of the pendulum in the other direction. Chang presents a picture of a woman who was not without her faults, who could be ruthless if necessary, and who was firmly rooted in a traditionalist and monarchist worldview, but who was also a reformer and a moderniser. Chang bases this, she claims, in large part on Chinese-language sources which have been largely disregarded by Chinese scholars and inaccessible to Anglophone ones.

I think there's much to consider here, and Chang is good at unpicking the ways in which gender shaped both how Cixi had to present herself and the ways in which both her contemporaries and later scholars have viewed her. However even I could see that there was special pleading in operation here. Telling me that Cixi rarely used torture or execution as a political tool when diplomacy and tact would do instead is one thing—but you cannot then gloss over in a couple of lines the fact that Cixi ordered that her adoptive son be poisoned when she was on her own deathbed, or his favourite concubine thrown down a well because there wasn't enough room for her in their entourage when fleeing Beijing!

*Empress Dowager Cixi* really reads like the first salvo in a broader reassessment of Cixi's life—Chang has probably been too laudatory here, but I think this biography should lead to further study and reassessment.

(To nitpick as a historian, I really disliked the citation style—why do publishers seem to think that a popular audience will faint away if footnotes are used? I also really, really wish that people would stop using the word 'medieval' as a synonym for 'barbaric'.)

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### Joely Black says

I grew up loving *Wild Swans*, and I was excited to start reading this. I kept seeing it in the window of book stores, enticing me. Yet the actual read of the book was often a terrible slog. The prose often felt rushed, and without any real life to it.

The notation system is terrible. Chang never uses clearly marked footnotes or endnotes. They are there, but you never know where there is a reference to a source because there's never any indication in the text. For a book making a lot of assertions that contradict received history, this is a frustrating failing.

Although it's clear that Cixi has been the victim of a long and pronounced character assassination, this felt rather biased the other way. Shocking acts, like the murder of the Emperor's favourite concubine, Pearl, by flinging her down a well, deserves something more than a paragraph, as does the eventual murder of Guangxu himself.

It's very difficult to know, without being an expert on Chinese history, how to judge the accuracy of the book. Cixi's life and work needs revision and an accurate accounting, but while the book presents some fascinating insight on the working of Chinese society at the time, it still feels quite flawed.

## Rebecca Foster says

**How can such an incredible life story be...just...so...boring?!** Chinese empress Cixi led a fascinating life: she wielded behind-the-scenes power over a third of the world's population for nearly the whole length of Queen Victoria's reign; she fell in love with a eunuch, survived multiple assassination plots, and was rumored to have poisoned several rivals, including her adopted son.

*And yet* this biography renders her life story utterly dull; like Kirsten Ellis did in *Star of the Morning : The Life and Times of Lady Hester Stanhope*, Chang takes an absurdly adventurous life and spoils it with dry, tedious prose. I had hoped for so much better from the celebrated author of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*.

The best parts are where Chang uses her personal knowledge of China to add depth to natural descriptions, such as "Autumn is Beijing's best season, when the sun is no longer scorching, the biting cold has yet to descend, and no sandstorms from the northwestern desert are whipping the city, as they do habitually in spring." Unfortunately, most of the language is not nearly so memorable.

As a result of her ruthless methods, Cixi is often remembered as a tyrant, but Chang clearly finds her inspirational: "She was a giant, but not a saint." Or, "As Pearl Buck observed, those who hated her were simply 'more articulate than those who loved her.'"

Her life certainly makes for a tale worth reading, but with so many biographies to choose from (including *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China* and Marina Warner's *The Dragon Empress: Life and Times of Tz'u-Hsi, Empress Dowager of China, 1835-1908*), you'll surely find a better teller.

(My full review is at [We Love This Book](#).)

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## Lisa says

I received an Advanced Copy of "Empress Dowager Cixi" through goodreads.

It's always a good thing to be inspired by real women from history. Unfortunately our history books hold few accounts of women who have impacted history or politics. If you ask me, Empress Dowager Cixi ranks up there along with Queen Elizabeth I. Jung Chang makes Cixi's story accessible through her no nonsense prose and seemingly thorough research. One cannot help but be truly impressed with Cixi's intellect and brilliant usage of her "station" in life as a secure leverage for securing political success. I will be recommending "Empress Dowager Cixi" as a read for my book club because it offers a plethora of issues for discussion.

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## Caidyn (SEMI-HIATUS; BW Reviews; he/him/his) says

This summer, I took a course on eastern civilizations. India, Japan, and, of course, China. However, when we were touching on the final dynasty, we never talked about Cixi. The most I remember discussing was that a three year old was put on the throne and then it all sort of tumbled to a terrible close for the monarchy. Enter Mao Zedong.

But, she was absolutely fascinating to me. Sure, the book could get a bit dry, but she literally ruled the throne without being crowned. That's happened so many times over the years, sure, but rarely with a woman. The only monarch that comes to mind is Catherine the Great, but she was the Empress, not ruling as a regent. Cixi went from being one of the poor Manchus to married to an emperor to being the lead woman because she had a boy by the luck of the dice.

Not only that, but she commanded great amounts of respect from her people, even those who didn't agree with her. They still respected her while disagreeing. If you were to look at the current presidential race, there's none of that. Trump shits on Hillary, Hillary shits back on Trump. No respect whatsoever. (Although, I don't respect Trump that much and I respect Hillary a touch more than I do Trump.) Not even Bernie was that way completely, and I love Bernie.

Even more than that, but she got along with her husband's other wife. They were friends until that Empress Dowager's last days alive. They worked together, a proper womanly team that so rarely happens even today. Today, there would be a whole calamity about who wins the man and they would sabotage each other.

Also, she tried to cut down the class system. A few more rights for the Han Chinese. Be friends with the eunuchs. Start a democracy or at least try to.

Like... this woman did all of that. And, unlike my experience with Massie's Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman, there was really no focus on possible lovers and rumors. It focused on Cixi and the amazing woman she was.

I've seen this book so many times at my local Half Price Books and refrained from buying it, but next time I go this is in my arms to come home with me. One of my best historical nonfiction reads this summer.

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## Oisín says

I started this book, carrying with me all standard anecdotal baggage one hears about the cruel old crone who loomed behind the imperial throne in the final decades of Qing dynasty China. Very quickly, the author thoroughly dispelled each and every one of these clichéd images. Rather than acting as a bulwark against modernisation and progress, Cixi actually spent nearly every waking day in her role as Empress Dowager drawing the Chinese state into a new age whilst still maintaining its independence from European dominance. The fact that this truth has for so long been obscured from the general public is owed as much to the inherent sexism of her times as to the modern Chinese Communist Party's eagerness to denigrate everything associated with the old empire in order to increase their own historical standing.

As I find myself reading more and more biographies as the years go by, I have begun to grow more capable of noticing when a writer is being too kind to their subject matter. Fawning over figures from the past serves about as much good as damning them for all eternity, in my opinion. That is why I was more than happy at Chang's willingness to highlight Cixi's flaws, both on a political and personal level, as it served to help me understand just why the Qing Empire struggled to adapt to an ever-changing world it was so woefully unprepared to face.

In addition to the titular star of the book, the author took time to showcase the many other figures who served under the "Old Buddha" (as the Dowager Empress was affectionately known in the provinces), working diligently to reform China's administration. Many of these figures were not even native Chinese, as it turns out! One of the most prominent individuals Chang brought up was one Sir Robert Hart, born in County Armagh, Ireland, who served as Inspector General for the Imperial Customs Service for over five decades,

helping to reform an antiquated and thoroughly-corrupt system of trade. I appreciated the time spent giving due credit to people such as these because it helped to enhance Cixi's stature as a leader of talented individuals, rather than as some mythic heroine who saved a nation all by herself.

I would absolutely recommend this book to anyone with even a passing interest in Chinese history. The author's style of writing is easily accessible to anyone who is curious as to how China entered the twentieth century, a century that it would later come to dominate when men and women followed from Cixi's example of slow but inevitable progress concerned with the benefit of all.

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## **Lyn Elliott says**

In telling the story of Ci Xi, who effectively ruled China for the best part of 50 years as Dowager Empress, Jung Chang has the great advantage of being able to access primary and secondary sources in Chinese as well as English. She has referenced a wide range of archival materials in European and Chinese collections, diaries, letters, books and articles.

Jung Chang argues that Ci Xi recognised early that China would need to modernise to just to survive against the invasions of the western powers, especially after the second Opium Wars in the 1850s. Although Ci Xi had little formal education, she was highly intelligent and usually fair and politically astute and drove many of the changes towards modernisation in China through the second half of the nineteenth century up till 190, when she died.

Her ability to exercise the level of power that she did was extraordinary, particularly given that, as a woman, she could have only restricted contact with men and seems to have left the imperial palaces in Beijing only in times of war or revolution. Despite this she was intensely interested in the outside world, sent ambassadors to Europe and the United States and keenly read their reports. She introduced the beginnings of an accessible education system, encouraged opening of China to foreign trade, and eventually accepted the introduction of railways - resisted for many years because of the damage they would do to family graves along the train routes.

In the early years of the twentieth century she sent out a mission to research electoral systems in democratic countries and took first steps to introduce democracy to China, though she didn't live long enough to steer it into any meaningful existence.

For as long as she held power, she was opposed by conservative members of the governing elites in China, including members of the Manchu ruling families. And through all this time, foreign powers (mostly European, but also Japan and America) were pushing hard for concessions for trade, for territory and for special concessions for their residents. War was inflicted on China several times during this period, weakening the Chinese state further each time. One of the things that appalled me was that after having invaded China, the western powers and Japan all demanded that the invaded country - the victim, if you like, had to pay massive 'reparations' to the invaders. Here you can see the ugliness of nineteenth century imperialism well and truly on display.

Anger against the foreign invaders was what drove the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1900), and Ci Xi's anger at the foreigners ruthless behaviour led her to support the Boxers until she realised they were too destructive that they were a threat to general order, not just to the foreigners. The poorly organised and armed Chinese were inevitably defeated, the foreign allied forces occupied Beijing, from which Ci Xi and court fled to Xian, where she stayed until the court returned to Beijing in early 1902.

She acknowledged quite soon that her initial support of the Boxers was possibly the greatest mistake of her rule.

I found this book easy to read, and could readily slot it into place in what I already know of Chinese history, culture and politics, where it helps to give another side to the mostly American or English histories of China that I have read up till now. It is based on wide-ranging research, and part of what makes the reading easy is that the author has a long notes section after the main text, in which sources are given for paragraphs and pages where they are needed, so that the reader is not confronted with continual referencing from within the text itself

I was the only one at the book club meeting for which I read this who has much of a background in history, and most of them found it hard going, with too much detail for their liking. I would have liked more of the wider social and political context within which Ci Xi operated. Another friend who has just read it thought it was far too easy on the ruthless imperialist behaviours of the western powers and Japan.

The main focus is on the woman herself, her lifestyle and her life as a female ruler cleverly manoeuvring her way through a male dominated, mostly conservative society, and with pressures for change building up before the revolutionary explosions of the twentieth century.

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### **BAM The Bibliomaniac says**

For close to forty years the Dowager Empress Cixi ruled the empire of China beginning in 1860. She is alternatively described as either pragmatic, shrewd, sensible, just and gracious or meddlesome, cunning, underhanded and selfish. She is documented throughout Chinese history as a scapegoat for the turmoil inflicted from the beginning of her rule to the beginning of the Republic. Research by Jung Chang has proven that is not the case. Throughout her reign in the name of her adopted son, the emperor, there was constant internal upheaval and rioting as well as wars with various western powers and Japan, earning China the world's contempt for a country once highly respected for its size and kindheartedness.

Cixi was known for both her decisive action and sagacious moves in governing as well as her ability to wait years to strike vengeance. Western society viewed her as " a Catherine of Russia, an Elizabeth of England, and a Cleopatra, as one of the great woman rulers in history." She had no problems battling the misogynistic society in which she dwelled, where most of her decisions were ignored by incompetent men on her council. She was a champion of women's rights as early as 1903.

This review could be many paragraphs long detailing all of her accomplishments and risk taking behavior, but that would spoil most of the book. Cixi deserves the admiration of her country. History should be rewritten.

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### **Louise says**

In total contravention to informed opinion, this author holds The Dowager Empress Cixi in awe and considers her a reformer. I was looking forward to what the author of Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China might have to say about Cixi. I was disappointed that not much of her premise holds up. The Dowager's actions, as cited in this very text, contradict the author's premise.

Women's roles in history are obscured and underrated. Cixi is not obscure and takes on her shoulders the centuries of tradition and resistance to change that put China in a weak position to deal with the modern world. Jung Chang gives no information to show that Cixi's leadership did anything to reverse this trend. What she does show is that Cixi is a consummate politician.

Cixi lucked out in producing the first male child for the Emperor Xianfeng and was befriended his wife the empress. Upon the emperor's death, Cixi aligned with Empress Zhen and they plotted their way to power. Upon the death of her son, the Emperor Tongzhi, on whom her position depended, she adopted her three year old nephew who became Emperor Guangxu. She controlled him and wheedled his power away from him. When he became an adult, discredited and imprisoned him. She later murdered him, for the good of China... of course. None of her power was used to reform China. It seems to have been used to appoint people who would perpetuate her own power and kill others who (may have) threatened it. As could easily be predicted, she was against the Boxer rebels until they were effective; then she supported them; and then when they were squelched by the westerners, she cozied up to the westerners. She promised China a constitutional monarchy... after her death, of course.

The text is often a paean that contradicts Cixi's life and actions. Page 344 tributes "Cixi's sense of fairness... penchant for consensus". This hardly fits the narrative to this point, the most dramatic example being Jade (the Emperor Guangxu's favorite concubine) for whom there was no room in the flight from the Boxers. Jade did not obey Cixi's orders to commit suicide, nor did Cixi notice the consensus of the eunuchs who did not step forward to push her into the well (p. 279) as she had ordered. Cixi had to order specific Eunuch to do this, who would surely not have done it had he thought he had a choice. On p. 354, after a whole book showing how Cixi excluded Han Chinese from the inner councils of running their own country, we learn that "she was not given to racial prejudice".

The last section, on the "Real Revolution of Modern China" is replete with examples of how the text, itself, discredits the thesis that Cixi is a reformer. In this "reform period" Cixi is enjoying her new western friends, to whose countries China is indebted; they shower her with gifts and attention. Cixi (p.326) issued an edict banning foot-binding and "approached the implementation ... with characteristic caution ... not her style to force drastic change" and it took a generation (i.e. regime change) because "Cixi was prepared to wait". Later, on p. 371 Jung Chung calls foot-binding a practice to which Cixi "put an end." It took a boycott (p. 349) of a reception by her British friends for her to issue an edit banning "bastinado" - the beating of prisoners to death. Future eliminations use various other methods and were covered up.

The book is good for its easy to follow chronology. The descriptions of the pageantry; crimson ink, seals and boxes; eunuch life; the education of young emperors; the culture of outbursts (weeping, banging heads on the floor, prostration for apology); and the mundane (what pipe attendants do and how they are trained) are excellent. The photographs, like the cover are great.

Are Cixi's mistakes, for which she apologized, greater than Mao's, for which he didn't? (p.373) Jung Chang, who was on the receiving end of Mao's "mistakes" considers Cixi's minimal compared with her achievements. From this volume, I appreciate Cixi's political achievements for herself, but find achievements for China lacking.

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## Montzalee Wittmann says

Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China by Jung Chang reads so smoothly like a novel but is strictly historical. I haven't read a history book so well done in a long time. Well done that keeps to the facts, not adding speculation, but adding what the what the surroundings/clothing/jewelry/etc

would look like. So well done I felt like I knew the society of the times, dress, politics, dress, etc. Very different culture but interesting. I got this from the library and it was the audio book.

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### **Sydney (?????) says**

It's factual and easy to follow, though the writing is a bit over the top in some places as far as the author's opinion; but, enjoyable. She was quite a woman.

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### **Bookdragon Sean says**

I'm planning on visiting China this summer (provided my university accept my application) because I find Chinese culture so fascinating. The history is so intriguing. My dissertation for my master's degree will directly address how English writers (namely Ezra Pound) appropriated Chinese literature and created a new form of English Poetry. There's so much I want to learn, and one day I'd even like to learn the language; Mandarin is, after all, the most commonly spoken language on Earth.

This is a biography of one of the most influential woman in Chinese history, so it was certainly good to revisit it. The book provides a complete life story of the woman who modernised China. We see her growth as a ruler; she begins to see the ruthlessness of court and understands that she must become equally as ruthless in order to be an effective leader. She was not a woman to be crossed. The fact that she managed to manoeuvre herself into such a position of power considering her origins is a ridiculously impressive feat. Cixi began a concubine and died as the Empress of China. How many could say the same?

She ruled from the shadows for many years. First, dictating from behind the throne of her son then eventually her adopted son's. Although she did not wear the title for many years, she was the real ruler of China. She was rumoured to have poisoned political rivals, possibly even her own adopted son in order to position herself further. Her reign was full of scandal; she fell in love with a eunuch which ended in disaster. Although the ruler of her country, and herself breaking through the gender based limitations placed on her, she was still dictated by the misogyny of her people.

This biography is undeniably biased. The author attempts to be impartial; she presents the facts in a careful way, though a powerful admiration for the Empress shines through the writing. Is this necessarily a bad thing? We all have our own opinions, and it is up to us to make our own minds up regarding historical figures. Cixi was not perfect, far from it, but name me a ruler who was. I took the author's opinions for what they were, and considered the facts in order to form my own opinion.

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### **Josh Brett says**

Where to begin with Cixi? Undoubtedly, Cixi has been unfairly maligned by the historical record, always (especially in Chinese historiography?) biased against women wielding political power, and she has too often appeared as the archetypal "Dragon Lady" (actually the title of an earlier biography). Her opponents have certainly had a better talent for cultivating a public image, both in defaming her and promoting themselves (but do we really need to call him "Wild Fox" Kang EVERY time??). As I see it, there are two main problems in Chang's interpretation of events. First is her uncritical adoption of modernization theory, discussing events in starkly diametrical opposition between "Medieval China" and the modern world. Her

allegiance to this vision of historical diffusion trumps even her Chinese patriotism, such as when she praises the post-Boxer occupying forces for bringing modern hygiene and policing (see Ruth Rogaski's hygienic modernity for a very different take on this!) to Tianjin. The second is her devotion to Cixi. Chang's book is very much in the great (wo)man approach to history, with every positive (i.e. moving along the road to modernity) development in China from 1861 to 1908 attributed directly to Cixi, while every misstep is due to the incompetence or opposition of the dithering idiots surrounding her. This can lead Chang into some narrative contortions to maintain her overwhelmingly positive view of Cixi, such as praising both Cixi's unbiased welcoming of foreigners and her patriotic sponsoring of the xenophobic Boxer movement. In my opinion the worst instance of this is the long set up of posing Kang Youwei as a Bond villainesque figure, in the pay of the Japanese and bent on killing Cixi and ruling through the Guangxu emperor. The end result of which is to portray her deathbed assassination of her nephew as not a last spiteful lashing out, but almost euthanasia, a last effort to "set right the affairs of the Empire." Which worked out so well, given that the Qing dynasty lasted a full three more years. Nevertheless, it was an interesting and entertaining listen (though the narrators voice for Cixi was cringe inducing "I will considah this vevy impohtant mattah"), I feel like I need to examine the sources that Chang is using to get a better picture that lies somewhere between the demonization and the hagiography.

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### **Moonlight Reader says**

This was way outside of my usual reading fare - I don't read a lot of non-fiction and I read very few books set in China. I am involved in a GR group, and we selected the Dowager Empress Cixi as an area of focus for the first part of the year, so I ended up reading this. It was, unfortunately, the only book I managed to read on the topic, but it was fascinating.

Dowager Empress Cixi was the last ruler from the Qing dynasty in China, and had been a concubine. Imperial China seemed very strange to me, with its rigorous and occasionally nonsensical rules for everyone based upon their birth, sex and status. The conflict with Japan is illuminated, and the scramble of the colonial powers for China was also handled through this very interesting biography.

I'd also heard of the Boxer Rebellion, but knew very little about it, so reading the sections about Cixi's ill-advised and ultimately devastating efforts to use the rebellion against western attempts to seize control of China was really interesting. The most interesting part of the book, however, was Cixi herself.

Mostly uneducated and excluded from power by her sex, Cixi managed to consolidate authority and rule China for decades from behind the throne. As a woman, she wasn't even allowed to meet directly with men. The fact that she was able to gain and retain power, and in so doing begin to modernize China much against its will is a testament to her determination and fortitude. She was utterly ruthless.

If you are interested in biographies, interested in imperial China, or if you just like to read non-fiction this is a fascinating choice.

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### **Ashley \*Hufflepuff Kitten\* says**

I think GR booted this off my TBR because I've had the book for years and would've sworn I'd listed it here on GR as well... whatever.

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