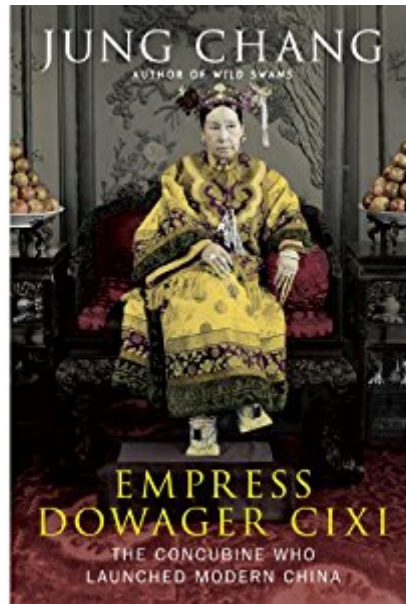


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Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China



Synopsis

Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) is the most important woman in Chinese history. She ruled China for decades and brought a medieval empire into the modern age. At the age of 16, in a nationwide selection for royal consorts, Cixi was chosen as one of the emperor's numerous concubines. When he died in 1861, their five-year-old son succeeded to the throne. Cixi at once launched a palace coup against the regents appointed by her husband and made herself the real ruler of China - behind the throne, literally, with a silk screen separating her from her officials who were all male. In this groundbreaking biography, Jung Chang vividly describes how Cixi fought against monumental obstacles to change China. Under her the ancient country attained virtually all the attributes of a modern state: industries, railways, electricity, the telegraph and an army and navy with up-to-date weaponry. It was she who abolished gruesome punishments like "death by a thousand cuts" and put an end to foot-binding. She inaugurated women's liberation and embarked on the path to introduce parliamentary elections to China. Chang comprehensively overturns the conventional view of Cixi as a diehard conservative and cruel despot. Cixi reigned during extraordinary times and had to deal with a host of major national crises: the Taiping and Boxer rebellions, wars with France and Japan - and an invasion by eight allied powers including Britain, Germany, Russia and the United States. Jung Chang not only records the Empress Dowager's conduct of domestic and foreign affairs, but also takes the listener into the depths of her splendid Summer Palace and the harem of Beijing's Forbidden City, where she lived surrounded by eunuchs - one of whom she fell in love, with tragic consequences. The world Chang describes here, in fascinating detail, seems almost unbelievable in its extraordinary mixture of the very old and the very new. Based on newly available, mostly Chinese, historical documents such as court records, official and private correspondence, diaries and eyewitness accounts, this biography will revolutionize historical thinking about a crucial period in China's - and the world's - history. Packed with drama, fast paced and gripping, it is both a panoramic depiction of the birth of modern China and an intimate portrait of a woman: as the concubine to a monarch, as the absolute ruler of a third of the world's population, and as a unique stateswoman.

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Customer Reviews

This is a very interesting book about Chinese history in the 19th and early 20th centuries, from the point of view of the central government -- specifically the Qing court. At first look, this book appears to be a biography of one person, but in fact it gives great insight into China during an important (and I'd say misunderstood time) as it emerged from its isolation in the 19th century. I must admit I didn't know much about the Empress Dowager Cixi before reading this book. When I was in Beijing several years ago, I had heard about her taking money earmarked for modernizing the navy and diverting it to build a stone pavilion shaped like a boat at the Summer Palace. My impression was that she was very backward, ignorant of the west, and controlling. On the contrary, the author, Jung Chang, is very sympathetic towards Cixi and he often showed me how my original impression of her was wrong, and she was much more than the caricature I had in my mind. She cared for China -- her motto was "China Strong". She was curious about the West and was impressed by the West's technology, their political systems, and how the West treated its own citizens, and she adopted (or tried to adopt) many facets of the West. Many times, she was hampered by conservatives who didn't want to change. This is also a book about a smart woman who became leader of 1/3 of the world's population -- not by birth, but by her own will -- when she was in her 20s and remained a strong force in a country for most of the rest of her life. It's telling that historians are not clear of what her original name was -- Cixi is an honorific name -- women's names weren't important enough to record, even when they were the emperor's mother.

When I was teaching in Singapore, the history syllabus covered the reign of the Empress Dowager Cixi, or Tzu-Hsi, as she was also known. I find her to be a complex and incredibly intelligent woman who bucked the restrictions imposed upon her gender during a period where females were extremely oppressed to rise through the ranks and become one of the most powerful women in

China's history. Though Cixi has been reviled by many as a despot, author Jung Chang, who also wrote the amazing *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, provides a starkly different perspective, one that shines the spotlight on the Empress Dowager's many achievements. The book also provides the reader with a compelling look into the politics of governing China during the period. As one of Emperor Xianfeng's many royal concubines, Cixi distinguished herself not only because she provided the emperor with a son, but was also known for her political acumen, and this proved helpful when the Emperor died five years later. Employing cunning strategies, Cixi positioned herself as the real ruler of China, with her son installed as the Emperor Tongzhi. Using recently accessible historical documents, primarily in Chinese, the author paints a compelling portrait of a woman who went against the grain and helped propel China into the modern era with significant strides being made in diverse fields such as economy, military, education, etc.

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 and was disappointed that not much in the 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.

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