

## MODERN HISTORY

### Empress Dowager Cixi

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Empress Dowager Cixi went from being an ordinary girl living in what was likely to have been a disadvantaged area of China to the absolute ruler of an empire. The Qing Dynasty ruled from 1619 to 1911 during a period of extreme conservatism, tradition and strong spirituality and towards its downfall was hit with numerous natural disasters. It was one of the most unevolved institutions of the world as it had very little change throughout thousands of years of tradition. Although Cixi was able to use manipulation and charm to achieve her goals, she was unable to control what the people associated with the end of a dynasty: a mix of a series of natural disasters and poverty which was believed to be a transcendent force unhappy with the dynasty's rulings.

Although very little is known about Cixi's childhood, it is generally accepted that she was the daughter of a Manchu official from a lower or middle class family from the Yehe and Nara clans so she was subsequently named Lady Yehonara. In September 1851, the young Lady Yehonara was registered with the Imperial Court as required of all Manchu girls living in the empire and she was later summoned to the Forbidden City with 60 other Manchu girls and was selected to be a concubine for Emperor Xianfeng.

Many years passed and Cixi went unnoticed by the Emperor, but through her charm and the help of her eunuch, was able to get his attention. Her rise to power came when she gave birth to the first male heir to the throne, who was named Tongzhi. For this, Cixi was gradually promoted up to a second rank concubine and the second most important woman in the Palace, just under Empress Ci'an. When Emperor Xianfeng died and Tongzhi became Emperor, Cixi became Empress Dowager and ruled "behind the curtain", using her biological son as a puppet and gradually giving herself and Ci'an more immediate power. Cixi continued to rule with Ci'an up until 1875 when Emperor Tongzhi died. Because Cixi risked losing her power, she forced her nephew Guangxu to take the role of Emperor and she was able to continue ruling behind the curtain, for another decade. When Emperor Guangxu reached maturity, Cixi was no longer able to rule on his behalf and then retired to a summer home in Peking. After the humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese war, Emperor Guangxu realised that China was no longer a superior power in the region because of its lack of modernisation. To respond to this, he implemented a series of reforms which became known as the Hundred Days' Reform. Because Cixi was highly conservative, she was actively opposed to the changing of the Chinese Empire and forced a return to the throne and reinstated her power over the Emperor. It can be easily seen what a powerful figure she was in the way she was able to reinstate her power and was far more manipulative and cunning than any other Chinese empress in history.

In 1900, the Boxer Uprising broke out in northern China. Cixi was supportive of the Boxers and used them to her advantage to protect her position and her country, although whether she did this because she feared the Boxers rebelling against her or the possibility of foreigners taking power is unclear. Eventually she made a formal announcement of her support for the Boxers and declared war on the Western powers.

When it became apparent that the Boxers' Kung Fu wasn't very effective against firearms and the Western powers took control of Peking, Cixi decided to accept the terms offered by the Allies and ended the war, maintaining to some extent her power in the region however she was now able to understand the importance of modernising the country. The Late Qing Reform was started and Cixi sent high officials to Japan and England to ask for assistance in reforming the nation. Ironically, Cixi started a reformation far more radical than that proposed by the people she had beheaded a few years before. Because of this it can be seen that Cixi was not completely conservative and was open to change if it was proven to be completely essential not only to her country but to her position, which seems to have been more important to her.

Cixi played a huge role in the course of the Qing dynasty and was to a large extent, because of her conservatism, responsible for its downfall. It is clear that Cixi shared the same opinion, as on her deathbed she said “never again allow a woman to hold the supreme power in the State”

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