

# The Western Perception of Empress Dowager Cixi

by

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BA, Simon Fraser University, 2011

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Master of Arts

in the Department of History

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## **Supervisory Committee**

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## Abstract

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Empress Dowager Cixi is one of the most widely recognized leaders of late Qing China, and she has been the major subject of numerous non-fiction and academic publications in Europe and North America. This, however, does not mean that Western knowledge on Cixi is strong. Although certain books, particularly those written by Cixi's closest associates, do provide valuable information describing who she was, most of these books, along with many others, also contain fabricated claims about her as well. As a result, falsities have become heavily intertwined with factual records of Cixi in Western publications. This thesis attempts to re-examine these Western works in order to reach a correct understanding of Cixi's life. In particular, this study demonstrates how a few major ideological trends, such as imperialism, Orientalism, sexism, and feminism, have influenced Western publications on Cixi and brought either bias or insights into the literature on her.

Key Words: Ideology, imperialism, anti-colonialism, Orientalism, sexism, and feminism.

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Dennis Chen

## **Dedication**

I want to dedicate this thesis to my mother and father for providing me with the support I needed to finish writing it, and to Rochelle Szeto for staying at my side and keeping me motivated to finish my research.

## Introduction

Empress Dowager Cixi was the *de facto* ruler of late Qing China from her rise to power in 1861 to her death in 1908. According to feminist writer Charlotte Haldane, Cixi was "the greatest female autocrat the world has ever known."<sup>1</sup> Whether she was really "the greatest female autocrat" is certainly debatable, but undoubtedly her reign had a significant impact on both Chinese and global history. Thus, many books and articles have been published about her all over the world. Among such publications, the popular and academic writings from the West, especially Europe and North America, deserve special attention because they include not only valuable information and historical insights but also many fabrications, fantasies, and misconceptions about this woman. For a better understanding of Chinese and world history during her time, it is useful to examine both the narratives and interpretations of Cixi, her personal life, and her political roles as portrayed in the non-fiction popular literature and academic publications of the West from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Cixi is probably one of the most misunderstood individuals in modern world history. Many aspects of her life remain unknown, and this is especially clear in Western publications. For instance, as biographer Grant Hayter-Menzies points out, to this day, "where her birth took place is a mystery,"<sup>2</sup> but why? How could knowledge about this woman, who ruled China for almost half a century, be so scarce? There are a number of explanations for this, with the first and foremost being the Empress herself.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Haldane, *The Last Great Empress of China* (London, UK: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1965), 263.

<sup>2</sup> Grant Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger: The Uncommon Friendship of Two Women and Two Worlds* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011), 19.

As Harry Hussey argued, “Tz’u Hsi [worked] to destroy many of the early records of her family and enforce a strict taboo on any discussions of her place of birth and early life.” She apparently did so to prevent the public from ever uncovering her humble origins and troubled past, which she thought, if discovered, would have tainted her image. Ironically however, by erasing all information regarding her early life, she actually “open[ed] the gates for a deluge of rumors and falsehoods that were far more damaging to her reputation than the actual facts would have been.” Left without the necessary facts, anyone wanting to write about her had no choice aside from using their own imagination to generate an image of who she was.<sup>3</sup> In result, many conflicting and possibly inaccurate descriptions of the Empress when she was young emerged, with some portraying her as a kind hearted individual, and others presenting her as an evil woman. If this explanation is correct, it would account for most of the misunderstandings surrounding her childhood and adolescence, but what about her later years as a highly profiled ruler of late Qing China?

There is another explanation for why the field of knowledge surrounding Cixi is so weak. The reason is simple, and pertains to the reality that many writers, especially those from the West, lack the language skills necessary to access Chinese sources, which presumably, contained most of the information about the Empress. As Maurice Collis noted, “Chinese accounts of what happened inside the secret halls of the Forbidden City had not [...] been published,” making them virtually inaccessible, but this did not discourage foreign scholars from writing about her, as they turned to using their imagination to construct images of who she was. This is why there is still literature

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<sup>3</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, xiv-vi, xvi-xvii.

“published in English about Tzu Hsi and the persons who surrounded her [...] but their limitations are marked,” as these works often appear to contain more falsities than they do truths, which is demonstrated by the reality that there are a whole lot of inconsistencies amongst the existing descriptions of the Empress.<sup>4</sup> The fact that these contradictions exist suggests that each author might have creatively dreamt up with his or her own idea of what the Empress’ identity was, but who was the first to be so inventive?

It seems that “Dr. George Ernest Morrison, [the] Peking correspondent of the *Times* of London, who” Sterling Seagrave calls “journalism’s first China watcher, [...] was responsible for [creating] many of the slanders and half-truths about China” through his “articles [which] contained [numerous] distortions and inventions.” This he did because he never achieved “mastery of the Chinese language [and as such,] he was always at the mercy of those who did speak it, [since] he could never [gather facts nor] verify a story on his own” without the help of “his Chinese-speaking assistant,” who unfortunately provided him with a lot of false information.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, it would be reasonable to suspect that his description of Cixi is indeed, an inaccurate depiction of her.

In 1903, during an interview with *The Argus* newspaper, Morrison was asked what he thought “was the real character of the Dowager Empress,” in which he responded by saying that “the Empress [was] a masterful woman, [...] determined to have power, and [was] entirely unscrupulous as to how she attains it [and when] compared with any

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious: Being the Life of the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi in the Form of a Drama with an Introduction and Notes* (London, UK: Faber and Faber Limited, 1943), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Sterling Seagrave, *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China*, with. Peggy Seagrave (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 6-7.

other ruler in the world, her ignorance is simply colossal.”<sup>6</sup> This description that he gives of the Empress certainly does not portray her favourably, but is it an accurate depiction of her? While it would certainly be difficult to provide a definite answer to this question, consider this: in 1905, two years after he made this remark, a very different description was given by Katharine Augusta Carl, who argued that Cixi had “an unusually attractive personality” complete with a “wonderfully youthful appearance, and a [...] remarkable intelligence.” So whose account of the Empress’ character is more correct? To determine which one is closer to the truth would not be easy, but keep in mind this fact: having actually lived in the Imperial Palace for a period of time, Carl had known Her Majesty at a personal level unrivaled by many.<sup>7</sup> This does not necessarily mean that Morrison’s conception of Cixi is wrong, but that it should at least be held suspect, based upon the comparison made in this paragraph and his language limitations, although Princess Der Ling, one of the many former ladies-in-waiting who served the Empress, noted that “miss Carl [...] didn’t speak Chinese” either.<sup>8</sup>

The main point here is that plenty of others probably experienced the same language barrier that seems to have affected Morrison’s ability to accurately portray the Empress, which is a big factor behind why so many contradicting claims regarding her exist today. Lacking the ability to access Chinese sources by themselves, Western writers did not have a lot of the vital information concerning Cixi’s character, which they possibly supplemented with their imagination, leaving each individual to come up with

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<sup>6</sup> “Dr. Morrison Interviewed: ‘The Year of Danger’,” *The Argus*, Saturday, January 31, 1903, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article9830833> (accessed July 24, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Katharine A. Carl, *With the Empress Dowager* (New York: The Century Co., 1905), 15, 20, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1911), 205; Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 19.

his or her own idea of who she was. To be fair however, these sources have not been properly analyzed by Chinese scholars either, but the reason is quite simple: the Chinese hated the Manchu led Qing Dynasty and thus, had no interest whatsoever, in researching about one of its most prominent figures.

That Qing rule was heavily resented by the Chinese, as Meribeth E. Cameron pointed out, should not be surprising since “there was reason for dislike of the dynasty [as] the Manchus were alien conquerors [and] had taken steps to maintain their racial integrity” from the rest of the population.<sup>9</sup> This is not to mention that, as Jonathan D. Spence described, “the Manchu conquest of China” was nothing short of brutal, with “the victorious Manchu troops [acting like] a marauding party of looters” that terrorized everyone. For instance, the local history of T’an-ch’eng recorded that when “the great army invaded the city, [it] slaughtered the officials, and killed 70 to 80 percent of the gentry, clerks, and common people [and] inside the city walls and out they killed tens of thousands.” Despite the violence however, the establishment of a new Dynasty brought the “promise of a restoration of order and prosperity and an end to the old corruption and inefficiency of the” past, that is until it began to develop serious problems of its own.<sup>10</sup> In result, by the turn of the century “between 1901 and 1906, [there were] scholarly attack[s] on the legitimacy of Manchu rule” as the monarchy became increasingly weak.<sup>11</sup> It soon proved itself unable to ward off the threats of foreign nations and “many people [became] outraged at the government’s failure to persevere in its resistance to

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<sup>9</sup> Meribeth E. Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China: 1898-1912* (New York, NY: Octagon Books, 1963), 134.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1979), 6, 7, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Charlotte Furth, “Intellectual Change: From the Reform Movement to the May Fourth Movement, 1895-1920,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 12: *Republican China 1912-1949*, Part 1, eds. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, 322-405 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 356.

imperialism” from the West, and “argued the issue of whether or not continued Manchu rule could be tolerated” since some “insisted that throwing off Manchu rule was the indispensable first step to effective resistance against imperialism and to building a modern country.”<sup>12</sup>

This rise in anti-Manchu sentiment meant that Cixi became heavily despised by the Chinese, as she was the de facto head of the Qing Dynasty, and was thus labelled as the cause of China’s weakness. As Collis explained, people felt that “she exposed old-fashioned weak China to the cruel humiliations inflicted upon it by the West and by Japan,” “because she set her personal advantage before the needs of the State.” Over time, this sense of resentment against her has led “the modern Chinese [to] execrate her memory,” which is probably why Chinese scholars have not dedicated much effort towards studying her.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, historian Sue Fawn Chung noted that “traditional Chinese historians always have been prejudiced against feminine influence in court,” meaning that they have probably been uninterested in writing a truthful biography about the Empress.<sup>14</sup> This was in large part because, as writer Jung Chang explained, “ancient Chinese tradition [...] strictly forbade royal consorts from having anything to do with state affairs,” presumably leading many to condemn Cixi for who she was.<sup>15</sup> The result however, is that academia has been left without a trustworthy authoritative piece of Chinese literature accurately documenting the Empress’ life that could theoretically be

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<sup>12</sup> Michael Gasster, “The Republican Revolutionary Movement,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 11: *Late Ch’ing, 1800-1911*, Part 2, eds. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, 463-534 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 496, 497.

<sup>13</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> Sue Fawn Chung, “The Much Maligned Empress Dowager: A Revisionist Study of the Empress Dowager Tz’u-hsi (1835-1908),” *Modern Asian Studies* 13:2 (1979): 177-196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312122> (accessed November 7, 2013), 177.

<sup>15</sup> Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (Toronto, ON: Random House Canada, 2013), 14-15.

used, had it existed, to verify the often contradictory information offered by Western writers.

As already mentioned, the fact that so many conflicting descriptions of the Empress exist suggest that some must be incorrect, but the fact that their accuracy cannot be adequately verified means that none can be entirely trusted. This is not to say that all Western literature on Cixi should be considered useless, only that it should be used with caution, as they do contain much information that is valuable and cannot be found elsewhere. Furthermore, they also provide some valuable insights into Cixi's personal and political life from new perspectives that have been missed even by scholars elsewhere.

Thus the task for this study is twofold. On one hand, its goal is to examine historical narratives about Cixi in Western publications and in the process to separate, whenever possible, the imagined stories from the reliable facts. On the other hand, it will also explore the reasons why Western authors presented so many different interpretations, especially questionable claims about Her Majesty.

### ***Cixi's Early Life and Rise to Power***

In the West, there are many biographies about Cixi, but most, if not all of them, are filled with arguments and claims that cannot be confirmed with proper evidence. At the same time, even widely-acclaimed academic publications on modern Chinese history, such as the *Cambridge History of China*, do not contain much information on Cixi. This suggests that Western academia really does not know much about her personal life and has not paid enough attention to her political roles in modern Chinese and world history.

In this sense then, there is a serious void in the available knowledge about her. Likewise, many of the details about her life offered in such Western literature could be false.

It is well established that Cixi was born during a chilly November in the mid-1830s. However, what happened to her from this point onwards until 1851, when she became one of Emperor Xianfeng's imperial concubines at the age of sixteen is virtually unknown. As has been indicated before, this did not prevent Western writers from using imagination to illustrate how she spent her childhood and youth. As Seagrave explains, “the actual details of [her] life to age twenty-one are so sparse that biographers and journalists found it necessary to invent them,” and the fabrications continued to be repeated in Western publications throughout most of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> While this practice may have temporarily satisfied Western curiosity about Cixi, in the long run it only served to flood the world with a great deal of incorrect or misleading information masking the true facts, making it very difficult for serious researchers to construct a reliable image of the so-called “greatest female autocrat.” This problem was recognized long ago by Italian Diplomat Daniel Varè who pointed out that “too much mystery surrounds the Forbidden City for us to write of its inmates with assured authority [and] even when facts are known, there are two or three versions, each giving a different rendering of what occurred.”<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, while a detailed understanding of Cixi's childhood may be impossible to reconstruct, her life began to become historically note-worthy once she started to gain political power in the 1860s, when she was already well into her mid-

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<sup>16</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 16, 18, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Daniele Varè, *Last of the Empress: And the Passing from the Old China to the New*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (London, UK: John Murray, 1936), viii.

twenties. It was only then that "a few facts here and there" began to appear about her, but even so, as Seagrave explains, information "gaps continued to be filled with fiction" on a fairly common basis.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, we have enough evidence available to construct a firm understanding of her rise to political power.

1860 was a year of absolute turmoil for the Qing Dynasty because Cixi's husband, Emperor Xianfeng was forced to flee Beijing to avoid capture by the victorious English and French troops that seized the imperial capital, Beijing, in the Arrow War. He retreated to the city of Chengde, which was known as Jehol at that time. While he hoped to "return to the capital [soon,] he never did return, for he fell ill in February 1861 (probably with tuberculosis) [and] died" in August.<sup>19</sup> Born in 1831, he was still relatively young at the time of his death, and had just one male heir, the five year old Zaichun, whom he conceived with his concubine Yehonala, the future Empress Dowager Cixi.<sup>20</sup>

Just as an added note, this explanation that Xianfeng succumbed to illness has not been accepted by everyone, with Collis claiming that he was instead murdered by Cixi who wanted her son to inherit the throne as soon as possible so that she, "as mother of the boy Emperor [could] bec[o]me Empress Dowager" and gain power earlier than initially expected. This alternative theory charges that "she destroyed the Emperor by poison," which was "administered to the Emperor in the form of an aphrodisiac."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, it was what he did just before his death, rather than the cause of it, that is of greater importance.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Kwang-Ching Liu, "The Ch'ing Restoration," in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 10: *Late Ch'ing, 1800*, Part 1, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, 409-490 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 418-19, 461.

<sup>20</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 25; Ma Yan, *Chinese Emperors: From the Xia Dynasty to the Fall of the Qing Dynasty* (London, UK: Compendium Publishing Ltd., 2009), 180; Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 8, 18.

Right “before he died,” Xianfeng designated “Tsai-ch’un [as] the heir apparent,” which should not be surprising since he was “his [...] only son.”<sup>22</sup> The young boy, once he was crowned and given the reign name of “Tung Chih, meaning United Rule or All-pervading Tranquility,” obviously became extremely important, but so too did Yehonala, who was soon raised “to the rank of Empress Dowager” and came “to be known as Tzu Hsi, the Motherly and Auspicious.” Furthermore, as her child was just five-years-old at the time, he was too young to rule, meaning that Cixi got to rule in his place as a regent.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to take a moment now to note that the young Emperor Tongzhi actually had a second regent because “the Hsien-feng Emperor had [also] been survived by his 25-year-old empress, née Nihuru, who [...] received the title of dowager empress” as well.<sup>24</sup> The latter, however, will not be discussed any further in this study because she did not play much of a role in history since she was, for the most part, completely “overshadowed [by] her co-regent,” “the Empress Dowager Tz’u-hsi, who wielded the authority of the throne” almost entirely by herself until she died in 1908.<sup>25</sup> As a result, “Yehonala was to be China’s real ruler for [the next] forty-seven years.”<sup>26</sup>

### ***Cixi’s Political Roles in Modern Chinese History***

From 1861 onwards, Cixi governed China almost completely unopposed until 1873, when she “was [obligated] to retire” because “her son had officially assumed the

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<sup>22</sup> Liu, “The Ch’ing Restoration,” 419.

<sup>23</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 45, 62.

<sup>24</sup> Liu, “The Ch’ing Restoration,” 419.

<sup>25</sup> Ting-ye Kuo and Kwang-Ching Liu, “Self-Strengthening: The Pursuit of Western Technology,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, Volume 10: *Late Ch’ing, 1800*, Part 1, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, 491-542 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 505.

<sup>26</sup> Liu, “The Ch’ing Restoration,” 422.

throne” after he became of age to rule on his own.<sup>27</sup> The young Tongzhi Emperor, however, did not live long after assuming power. He contracted smallpox and succumbed to the disease in 1874. His death thus signalled the return of Cixi to the political realm as she was now presented with the task of naming a crown prince to inherit the vacant throne. To fill this spot, she chose her four-year-old nephew, Zaitian, who was far too young to rule. This meant that Cixi, along with Cian (Niu-huru), were to serve as regents once again, and together they gave the young emperor the reign title of Guangxu, but Cian soon died a few years later.<sup>28</sup>

When the Guangxu Emperor reached the age of majority in 1889, and was able to begin governing China on his own, Cixi was forced into her second retirement. It must be noted that she never actually relinquished her powers in full, and while "she might allow Kuang-hsu to handle day-to-day administration," as historian Hao Chang explains, "on important matters such as appointment to the Grand Council and the six boards she retained decision-making power." Nonetheless, she gave her nephew enough freedom to explore his newfound role on the throne, and he soon proved to be a rather open minded ruler, becoming deeply drawn to Western ideas of political reforms since he saw them as the key to strengthening his Empire and saving China from its defeats, such as the one suffered during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895).<sup>29</sup> His approach was so radical that, as Laidler points out, it marked "the first time any Manchu Emperor had ever concerned

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<sup>27</sup> E. Backhouse and J. O. P. Bland, *Annals & Memoirs of the Court of Peking: From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 419; Marina Warner, *The Dragon Empress: Life and Times of Tz'u-Hsi, 1835-1908, Empress Dowager of China* (London, UK: Vintage, 1993), 103, 105.

<sup>28</sup> Ma, *Chinese Emperors*, 185, 186.

<sup>29</sup> Hao Chang, "Intellectual Change and the Reform Movement, 1890-8" in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 11: Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, Part 2*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, 274-338 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 319, 326.

himself with a study of other nations."<sup>30</sup> His interests would eventually lead him to embark on what would be known as the Hundred Days of Reform in 1898.

In mid-1898, Guangxu issued over a hundred edicts, each outlining some form of change to the Empire. Through these decrees, he ordered drastic reforms ranging from training of the military forces along new standards, to restructuring of the educational system.<sup>31</sup> While this push for national transformation was initially supported by Cixi, her enthusiasm for it did not last long.<sup>32</sup> "Guangxu seem[ed] to have mistakenly thought that his aunt [...] would support his vision of a new China [but] in fact she was disturbed by some of the proposed changes that threatened to weaken the Qing ruling house." She therefore decided to step in and halt the process by placing "Guangxu under palace detention," by publishing "an edict claiming that the emperor had asked her to resume power." Following this manoeuvre, she would retain the regency until her death in 1908.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as Chang points out, "the empress dowager revoked all the important policy innovations that the Kuang-hsu Emperor had announced during the Hundred Days," effectively bringing the whole radical movement and any form of Westernization or modernization to an end.<sup>34</sup>

There is probably another reason, aside from preserving her dynasty, for why Cixi decided to end the Hundred Days of Reform. She had a long internalized hatred of foreign powers, and thus did not have any desire to see her country Westernize in any

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<sup>30</sup> Keith Laidler, *The Last Empress: The She-Dragon of China* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2003), 184.

<sup>31</sup> Chang, "Intellectual Change and the Reform Movement," 326.

<sup>32</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 188.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 229.

<sup>34</sup> Chang, "Intellectual Change and the Reform Movement," 328-329.

way.<sup>35</sup> Starting from the time of Cixi's rise to power, China was not only defeated during the Arrow War, but was also forced to endure the loss of one of its national treasures, the beautiful twenty-five thousand-acre Summer Palace called the Yuan Ming Yuan, which the invading armies not only looted, but mercilessly burned to the ground in 1860. As architect-turned-writer Harold Hussey asks, "is it unreasonable to believe that the idea that China should rid herself of all foreigners and all things foreign came to the young and saddened Empress at this time?"<sup>36</sup> The deeply ingrained anger she garnered from then on would finally surface at the turn of the century when the Qing Empire was thrown into major crisis in 1900.

By the end of the nineteenth century, anti-foreign sentiment was rising rapidly in China, and it culminated in 1900 in the formation of the Boxer militias, which aimed to drive all Westerners out of their country. It did not take them long to earn the support of Cixi, who by then had become so angry that she felt that "an all-out attack on the legations was necessary to expunge the humiliations of [the] half a century" since the Arrow War. She "summoned them to Peking" to orchestrate this vengeance campaign against the foreign diplomats serving in the embassies at the time. Soon afterwards, "the various Boxer groups were united [...] in their determination to destroy the foreigners and their Chinese collaborators," but this quickly snowballed into something much larger, and the conflict expanded far beyond the confines of the capital city.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Der Ling, *Kowtow* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc., 1929), 230-231.

<sup>36</sup> Harry Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor: The Life and Times of Tz'u Hsi, 1835-1908, Empress of China* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1949), 119, 120, 121, 123.

<sup>37</sup> Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, "Late Ch'ing Foreign Relations, 1866-1905," in *The Cambridge History of China Volume 11: Late Ch'ing, 1800-1911, Part 2*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, 70-141 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 117, 118, 121-122.

Cixi made the biggest political error of her career at this moment. According to Spence, “praising the Boxers now as a loyal militia, on June 21, 1900, the empress dowager issued a 'declaration of war' against foreign powers," and this effectively put China into an open conflict with every country whose legation in Beijing was attacked. The Qing Empire, however, was ill prepared to fight, and along with Guangxu, Cixi was forced to flee Beijing for the second time in her life when "a foreign expeditionary column of about 20,000 troops, consisting mainly of soldiers from Japan, Russia, Britain, the United States, and France [...] entered Peking and raised the Boxer siege on August 14."<sup>38</sup> Rather than achieving vengeance for the defeats she had faced before, the Empress Dowager was left to swallow yet another humiliating defeat at the hands of Westerners.

With this defeat, however, Cixi came to the same conclusion that her nephew had reached two years earlier and realized that it was not anti-foreign conservatism, but rather political reforms that could strengthen and protect the Qing Dynasty from the aggressive foreign powers. “The Empress Dowager [...], who had rejected the sweeping blueprints of Guangxu's 'Hundred Days of Reform' edicts in 1898,” as John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman point out, “felt obliged by 1901 to embrace reform as unavoidable.”<sup>39</sup> This, however, was only the beginning of her plans to transform China, which would get far more ambitious as the years went along. “In November 1906, the empress dowager issued an edict promising to prepare a constitution and reform the administrative structure of China by reshaping the existing ministries and adding new ones,” which was an idea far more radical than any of those that “Guangxu and his supporters had been prevented

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<sup>38</sup> Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 232; 235.

<sup>39</sup> John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 242.

from pushing through” less than a decade before.<sup>40</sup> She also, as historians William J. Duiker and Bessma Momani explained, “embraced a number of reforms in education, [having] the venerable civil service examination system replaced by a new educational system based on the Western model.”<sup>41</sup> In the end, however, as historian Akira Iriye noted, Cixi’s push for change “came too late and [was] too insufficient to make a difference.” The Qing Empire collapsed in 1912, shortly after her death. Nonetheless, she should still be commended for working “desperately to prolong [the Empire’s] life by last-minute attempts at administrative and educational reform.”<sup>42</sup>

It should also be noted that these efforts in the early-1900s were not Cixi’s first attempt at reform. In 1860, she had been the one who “accept[ed] the Western Treaty System and [...] created a prototype foreign office [called] the Zongli Yamen.”<sup>43</sup> This was a major change since “China had never before needed an office of foreign affairs because [it] had never recognized another state as an equal.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Cixi also sponsored military modernization and early industrialization in late Qing China through “supporting the conservative Chinese scholar generals [who] began to Westernize,” albeit while also resurrecting “the components of the traditional Confucian state [and] reviving the traditional order,” in an effort to restore their nation’s power. In result, under the Empress’ watchful eye, they “set up arsenals to supply modern arms, built steamships, [and] translated Western textbooks in technology.” In particular, Cixi voiced her support

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<sup>40</sup> Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 244.

<sup>41</sup> William J. Duiker and Bessma Momani, *Twentieth-Century World History: A Canadian Perspective* (Toronto, ON: Thomson Nelson, 2007), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Akira Iriye, “East Asia and the Emergence of Japan, 1900-1945,” in *The Oxford History of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Michael Howard and Wm. Roger Louis, 139-150 (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 142.

<sup>43</sup> Fairbank and Goldman, *China: A New History*, 213.

<sup>44</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 66.

for “Zeng Guofan and his younger coadjutor, Li Hongzhang [...], who set up an arsenal at Shanghai to make guns and gunboats [because] Li concluded that in order to strengthen herself China must learn to use Western machinery,” since he was convinced that “the foreigners domination of China was based on the superiority of their weapons.”<sup>45</sup> Sadly, Cixi’s roles in these reformist movements are often unrecognized in Western literature. Many previous studies on the late Qing diplomatic, military and economic reforms have largely failed to discuss how the Zongli Yamen and other reformist institutions were connected to her.<sup>46</sup> Perhaps this is because there is not much information regarding her in this area, and if so, then this reflects an overall lack of knowledge about her, although there are numerous popular and scholarly publications about her in the West.

### ***A Re-examination of Cixi’s Images in Western Publications and Perspectives***

This study is not a biographical examination of Cixi herself but rather a critical re-examination of false and valuable information as well as different interpretations of her personal and political lives in both popular non-fiction and academic publications that appeared in the West. As there is such a voluminous amount of Western publications about her, this task would be fulfilled over the course of three main chapters.

Chapter one will largely focus on the narrative of Cixi in Western literature published up to and including 1949, the final year of the Chinese Communist Revolution. In particular, it examines a handful of memoirs written about Cixi by some of her closest

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<sup>45</sup> Fairbank and Goldman, *China: A New History*, 213, 217-218..

<sup>46</sup> Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, *China’s Entrance into the Family of Nations: The Diplomatic Phase, 1858-1880* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); W. E. Soothill, *China and the West: A Sketch of Their Intercourse* (Totowa, NJ: New Impression, 1974); William L. Tung, *China and the Foreign Powers: The Impact of and Reaction to Unequal Treaties* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Ocean Publications, Inc., 1970).

Western associates, such as Der Ling, Katharine A. Carl and Sarah Pike Conger.<sup>47</sup> This chapter will also look at biographies of Cixi produced by other authors such as Isaac Taylor Headland's *Court Life in China: The Capital, Its Officials and People*, Philip W. Sergeant's *The Great Empress Dowager of China*, and Daniele Varè's *Last of the Empresses: And the Passing from the Old China to the New*.<sup>48</sup> When these publications are compared with each other and evaluated through textual research, it will be clear that they include both fabricated and valuable information about Cixi.

Chapter Two will examine historical narratives on Cixi that were published since the Chinese Communist Revolution. With the exception of Charlotte Haldane's *The Last Great Empress of China*, most books dedicated to discussing the Empress that were produced after 1949, when compared to the literature written earlier, tended to have more scholarly qualities as authors took greater care in properly citing the source of their information.<sup>49</sup> In this sense then, the later material can be somewhat seen as an academic response to the biographies and memoirs of the past, but as the coming analysis will demonstrate, inconsistencies found within the newer works show that they are no more accurate than the older texts. For instance, while Keith Laidler argues that Emperor Guangxu's Pearl Concubine was murdered by Cixi who "barked a command to the eunuchs [to have her] cast down a nearby well [...] to drown," Hayter-Menzies claims the opposite, stating that "what in fact happened was not murder but suicide," since "the well is of a narrowness that would have barely permitted the easy introduction of a child," let

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<sup>47</sup> Carl, *With the Empress Dowager*; Sarah Pike Conger, *Letters from China: With Specific Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China* (Chicago, IL: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1909); Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City*.

<sup>48</sup> Isaac Taylor Headland, *Court Life in China: The Capital, Its Officials and People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909); Philip W. Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager of China* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1911); Varè, *Last of the Empress*.

<sup>49</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*.

alone an adult woman.<sup>50</sup> This is just one example of how even recent publications contain conflicting facts, which suggests that not only are many aspects concerning Her Majesty still a mystery, but that writers have also, because of this, continued to use their imagination, or the imagination of others, whenever necessary to obtain information to supplement their discussions about her.

It should be noted that this divide between Chapters One and Two is mainly an arbitrary guideline that was selected to better organize the discussion at hand, and thus can be fluid at times. Based on the content of their work, certain writers will appear in both chapters. For instance, although her book was published in 1965, which automatically places her in the category of recent writers, on occasion, Haldane will be analyzed with the early writers because some of her views are actually closer to theirs. Aside from such exceptions however, this separation of material published before and after 1949, will be strictly adhered to.

Along with the many books listed above, many of which discuss Cixi exclusively, Chapters One and Two will also periodically include other general texts on China if and when they provide information that will significantly further the discussion at hand. Some of these books include Arthur W. Hummel's *Eminent Chinese of the Ch'ing Period: 1644-1912*, and Barbara Bennett Peterson's *Notable Women of China: Shang Dynasty to the Early Twentieth Century*, since they came from highly acclaimed publishers and can be considered a fairly trusted and authoritative voice on the subject

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<sup>50</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 195; Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 244.

matter.<sup>51</sup> Otherwise, most general histories of China will be omitted simply because of the sheer number of them.

While Chapters One and Two provide in depth discussions on much of the scholarly material published on Cixi throughout the past century or so, fictional literature, such as novels, will not be included in this study because such publications, unlike academic and other non-fiction literature, are produced specifically for entertainment purposes and therefore are not expected to adhere to any standards of accuracy. Although there are many interesting publications in this category, they are not obligated to produce a truthful image of Cixi, and thus, will be left out of the research here. There is however, one particular exception to this rule, and that is a play titled *The Motherly and Auspicious*, which was written by Maurice Collis who claimed that his work was based on scholarly research, and thus provides a more accurate depiction of the Empress than any other existing book. He “insisted that all the persons in the play are historical and that the characters given them are deduced from the original narratives” found in “his [...] private translations of [...] Chinese works” and primary sources. As a testament to this effort in preserving historical accuracy, he asserted that “a great part of the dialogue [from scene three] is almost a verbatim translation from the sources.”<sup>52</sup>

In regard to both academic and non-fiction publications, the third chapter of this study will raise and answer two major questions: First, why do Western publications seemingly contain so much imagined material, and second, why and how have Western writers, including academic scholars in the West, have continually presented different

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<sup>51</sup> Fang Chao-ying, “Hsiao-ch’in,” in *Eminent Chinese of the Ch’ing Period: 1644-1912*, ed. Arthur W. Hummel, 295-300 (Taipei, TW: Ch’eng Wen Publishing, 1970); Song Ruizhi, “Cixi,” trans. Ma Li, in *Notable Women of China: Shang Dynasty to the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Barbara Bennett Peterson, 351-363 (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 12, 13, 14, 24.

and sometimes mutually contradictory images about Cixi? Of the two questions, the second is perhaps of greater importance and the search for its answers requires a broad look at the political and ideological contexts of the two types of Western publications on Cixi.

As a closing note, from this point onwards, all Chinese names and terms will be romanized by using the Pinyin system. For example, while under the Wade-Giles format of the past, Cixi's name was spelt as "Tzu Hsi," she will be referred to as "Cixi" in this study other than in quotations. Similarly, cities and provinces such as "Peking" and "Kwangsi" will be spelled instead as "Beijing" and "Guangxi," respectively using pinyin.<sup>53</sup> For the sake of clarity, this standard will be strictly adhered to except when quotations or excerpts are included, in which case, the original spellings will be preserved.

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<sup>53</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 9, 48.

## **Chapter One: Knowledge and Imaginations of Cixi in Early Western Literature**

The early Western literature on Cixi, as mentioned earlier, has been produced by both her personal associates and by those who never had any contact with her. It seems that a Western author's opinion about Cixi is dependent, at least to a certain degree, on whether he or she had the chance to meet Her Majesty at some point in their lives. As Reverend Isaac Taylor Headland explained, "the foreigners who have come into most intimate contact with her, voice her praise; while her hostile critics are confined for the most part to those who have never known her."<sup>54</sup> Thus, it should be kept in mind that Cixi's foreign acquaintances were inclined to present narratives about her with a favorable bias, while those who lacked intimate knowledge of her tended to use their imagination to depict her as an evil woman. To determine which book about her includes false or reliable narrative requires detailed analysis of both groups of writers and textual research on their respective works.

### ***Western Authors of Early Literature on Cixi***

As mentioned above, Chapter One focuses on analyzing literature written about Cixi before the Chinese Communist revolution, which includes the priceless memoirs and biographies produced by her close associates. Unsurprisingly, these books exist only in trivial numbers because only very few Western authors have had the opportunity to meet

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<sup>54</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 2.

her. Amongst them is one particularly interesting woman of mixed Chinese-American descent, Der Ling, who was served in the Imperial Court from 1903 to 1905 as one of Cixi's Ladies-in-waiting.<sup>55</sup> She produced several books based upon her unique experience in this role, such as *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, *Kowtow*, and *Old Buddha*, to name just a few.<sup>56</sup> From the United States also came two other who female authors, Katharine Augusta Carl, who painted Cixi's personal portrait from 1903 to 1904, and Sarah Pike Conger, the wife of Edwin Hurd Conger, who from 1898 to 1905 was an American diplomat to China.<sup>57</sup> Reverend Isaac Taylor Headland should also be included in this group of Western authors, although his relation to Cixi is a little different from those just introduced, since he never actually came into direct contact with her. As he explains, "for twenty years or more [his spouse] Mrs. Headland has been physician to the family of the Empress Dowager's mother, the Empress' sister, and many princesses and high official ladies in Peking."<sup>58</sup> Generally speaking, these four Western authors were responsible for providing some of the most positive portrayals of Cixi.

Also to be included in Chapter One, is the memoir of Reginald F. Johnston titled *Twilight in the Forbidden City*. Unlike the authors introduced in the previous paragraph, Johnston never had any personal contact with Cixi, but this did not mean that he lacked access to information on Her Majesty. After becoming the "faithful and affectionate servant and tutor" of Puyi, the Xuantong Emperor, he took up "residence at the Manchu

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<sup>55</sup> Pamela Kyle Crossley, "Forward," in *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling*, by Grant Hayter-Menzies, xv-xviii (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), xvi, xvii; Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 19.

<sup>56</sup> Der Ling, *Kowtow*; Der Ling, *Old Buddha* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, Inc., 1929); Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City*.

<sup>57</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 11, 18, 61-62, 222, 225, 231, 232, 245.

<sup>58</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 1.

Court during the period of its ‘twilight’,” which was “the thirteen years that elapsed between the establishment of the so-called Republic at the beginning of 1912 and the expulsion of emperor P’u-Yi [...] from the imperial palace [...] in November 1924.” By living with the royal highness, he “came [...] to know” the “members of the Manchu imperial family [...] more intimately than any other foreigner,” allowing him to be a rather authoritative voice when discussing Cixi and her history.<sup>59</sup> For this reason, Johnston must be included in this thesis as well.

In comparison to the privileged few who met Her Majesty or have personally served the Imperial Court, the Western writers who did not are too numerous to all be reviewed in this chapter, and as such, only a few will be included. Two of those I will discuss are Daniel Varè and Harry Hussey. Both individuals claimed that their work was research based and thus, not fictional, but neither one of them provided any citations or bibliographical information explaining where they got their facts from. While Varè explained that he “use[d] the translation of several Chinese documents,” Hussey stated that he had “searched the libraries and books in private collections for every scrap of information that could be found relating to the life of Empress Tz’u Hsi,” yet they both failed to indicate what sources they actually used.<sup>60</sup> This makes it very difficult to determine the accuracy of the various descriptions of Cixi that are found in their respective books, a problem that will be examined in much greater detail throughout the remaining parts of this thesis.

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<sup>59</sup> Reginald F. Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City* (London, UK: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1934), 5, 6, 16, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, xii-xiii; Varè, *Last of the Empress*, viii.

Chapter One will also include Philip W. Sergeant and Maurice Collis in its analysis, but the work of these two authors, unlike that of Varè's or Hussey's, provides some indication of where the information about Cixi was retrieved from. Sergeant for instance, provided some footnotes throughout his book documenting what sources he used, however, these are far and few in between, which suggests that his writing is based less on solid facts than it is on public hearsay, rumours, and even perhaps, his own imagination. As per the earlier discussion, Sergeant was not alone in imagining the Empress' identity, a reality that he is fully aware of since he was highly critical of how "many English writers have [gone] without making any attempt to verify" "the horrible accusation[s]" that they made against Cixi, most of which seem untrue and have "all the marks of a Peking native rumour [...] as [there is] no real evidence to support them."<sup>61</sup> Ironically, Sergeant conveniently leaves out the fact that most of his own claims are not supported by any formal sources either. Like Sergeant, Collis also provided some indication of where he got his information, but instead of using footnotes, he simply provided an informal bibliographical list and left out all of the details necessary to connect his argument to the source materials.<sup>62</sup> The question of course, is whether or not this was done intentionally. Did Collis purposely leave formal citations out of his book? By doing so, regardless of reason, he made it extremely difficult for his readers to verify the accuracy of his writing, which suggests that he could very well be hiding the fact that his work was driven more by imagination than by scholarly research. As with Varè and Hussey, this is an issue that will be looked at more thoroughly later on.

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<sup>61</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 100, 314.

<sup>62</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 30.

Alongside these authors of early literature on Cixi, two other Westerners, linguist Edmund Trelawny Backhouse and journalist John Ottway Percy Bland, who coauthored a number of books on Cixi, will also be included in this chapter.<sup>63</sup> At first glance, a couple of their works, namely *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzū Hsi* and *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking: From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, give off the appearance of being serious academic studies, but they have since been “entirely discredited given Backhouse’s forging of key documents supporting their theories about her.” Thus, at best their books could be considered alongside other non-fiction publications, if not to be viewed as completely made-up and in the realm of fantasy novels.<sup>64</sup> While their books were obviously problematic, it does not really stand apart from the imaginative products conjured by others. Nevertheless, Seagrave goes so far as to claim that their fraudulent treatment has contaminated the whole field of sinology. Indeed, “Backhouse [...] cites Chinese and Manchu sources that turn out to be counterfeit,” and as such, he “renders many historical works suspect not only because he is a major source” that “is cited as the principal source for nearly all written material about the last years of imperial China, [...] but because he caused much scholarly study to be undertaken during this century based upon assumptions that are now clearly false.”<sup>65</sup>

After a general introduction to the authors of popular literature on Cixi, it is time to examine the narrative reliability of their publications. My examination will follow chronological order in considering their records of Cixi’s personal and political life in order to directly compare how different authors portrayed her. As the following pages

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<sup>63</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 9, 11, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 207.

<sup>65</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 7, 11, 13, 16, 19.

will reveal, each writer developed his or her own idea of who the Empress was, leaving us with many conflicting descriptions of her identity, but the explanation for why there are so many contradicting claims about her will be left for the final chapter.

### ***Western Popular Literature on Cixi's Early Life***

As already mentioned, Cixi's early life is a complete jumble in Western literature. Authors of such works have made many different claims about her birthplace, birthday, father, first lover, and so on, but most of them failed to present any reliable sources. Many of these claims are also mutually contradictory and turn out to be obvious imaginings of the different authors.

The birthplace of Cixi, for instance, seems to have been unknown to her closest associates. "Even her former lady-in-waiting, Princess Der Ling, who had many intimate conversations with the elderly Cixi between 1903 and 1905, and wrote a biography of the dowager in 1929," as Hayter-Menzies explains, "sidesteps all specifics about Cixi's birthplace or where she was living when summoned to the Forbidden City."<sup>66</sup> This, however, did not stop others from trying to guess and subsequently claim to have discovered the secret location. According to Headland, "she was born in a small house, in a narrow street inside of the east gate of [Beijing's] Tartar city."<sup>67</sup> Hussey seems to agree with this, further claiming that she was born in "the smallest courtyard of a house on Ta Ssu T'iao Hutung," which was in "the Tartar city of Peking, out near the Hsi Chih Men, the gate in the northwest corner of the city, where the poorer Mongols and Manchus

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<sup>66</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 9.

lived.”<sup>68</sup> In contrast, Varè suggests that “she was born [...] possibly in Hunan, or perhaps in Anhwei.”<sup>69</sup> Which of these views are correct? Unfortunately, even with the time passed since their writing, Western writers are still not sure about that.

Perhaps even more surprising is the subject of Cixi’s birth year, which is not mentioned in the works of quite a few Western authors, including those who made an effort to discuss her early life, such as Der Ling and Varè. Of those who did try to determine a particular date, their claims are either very vague, or are highly inconsistent with others. For instance, Headland states that “she was [...] born about 1834,”<sup>70</sup> a point agreed upon in the *Oxford Reference: A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century History, 1914-1990*.<sup>71</sup> Bland and Backhouse, however, asserted that she was born a year later, “in November 1835.”<sup>72</sup> Their claim is supported by both Collis and Hussey, with the former stating that “Tzu Hsi [...] was born in 1835,” and the latter specifying that it was on “the tenth day of the Tenth Moon of the fifteenth year of the reign of Tao Kuang, [which was] November 28, 1835.”<sup>73</sup> This date given by Hussey is however, not widely accepted and has been challenged by both Haldane, who suggested “3 November 1835,” and Hayter-Menzies who argued that it was “November 29, 1835,” although he was quick to note that this is just “the received birth date for Cixi,” and it is still open for debate.<sup>74</sup> While the work of Haldane and Hayter-Menzies does not naturally belong in Chapter One’s

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<sup>68</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 10, 92.

<sup>71</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 10; Peter Teed, *Oxford Reference: A Dictionary of Twentieth Century-History 1914-1990* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992), 92.

<sup>72</sup> J. O. P. Bland and E. Backhouse, *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzū-Hsi* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 1.

<sup>73</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 7; Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 1.

<sup>74</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 17; Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 19.

discussion, considering that their books were published in 1964 and 2011, respectively, their claims are included here to demonstrate the confusion over this issue. Thus, as with Cixi's birthplace, it seems that no one really knows when she was born either.

These inconsistencies with Cixi's birthplace and date of birth, although problematic, are not too important in narratives of her early life. The discrepancies surrounding her familial background, on the other hand, are a more important issue. In particular, her father's identity has been a subject of great debate, with some authors slandering him as having been a criminal, while others argue that he was a righteous man. The confusion about him begins with his name. According to Headland's narrative of Cixi, "her father's name was Chao."<sup>75</sup> Hussey, in contrast, suggested that he was an "attractive young Manchu [called] Hwei Cheng."<sup>76</sup> While his true name remains an unsolved issue in these publications of the West, their authors have made more contradictory claims about his roles in society.

There are many theories circulating about the type of person Cixi's father was. Perhaps the simplest description of him is the one offered by Headland, who wrote that "he was a small military official [...] who was afterwards beheaded for some neglect of duty."<sup>77</sup> In line with this position are a few other Western authors who offered supplementary details supporting this claim, albeit without any mention of his execution. Bland and Backhouse, for instance, expand on this claim by stating that "her father, whose name was Hui Cheng, held hereditary rank as Captain in one of the Eight Banner Corps [but] was generally accounted unsuccessful by his contemporaries [and] died when

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<sup>75</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 9.

his daughter was but three years of age.”<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Sergeant also stated that “her father was a Manchu military officer of the name of Hweicheng.”<sup>79</sup> Varè then took this argument further and asserted that “unlike the majority of military officials in China, he had amassed no great fortune, which seems to prove that he must have been either a very honest or a very incompetent man” who “died when Yehonala was still a child.”<sup>80</sup> Just because the five authors discussed in this paragraph all seem to believe that Cixi’s father was a military man does not however, mean that they are correct, as there are many others who disagreed with them.

In contrast to their accounts is Collis’s assertion that Cixi’s father was not a military man at all, but had instead been “an obscure Manchu official” named “Hui Cheng who died [...] in the province of Hunan” where he and his family was living.<sup>81</sup> Differing a little from this claim is Haldane’s belief that he was “an obscure Manchu official” who “died at his provincial post,” which was “in the province of Anhui, where [he had] held an unimportant provincial inspectorship.”<sup>82</sup> Again, while most of Haldane’s work will be saved for discussion in Chapter Two, her argument regarding Cixi’s father was included here to show just some of the many contradicting descriptions of him provided by Western authors, which have left us asking, was he a military officer or a civilian official, and also, to which province was he appointed? Unfortunately, we currently do not have the answer to this question, and perhaps we never will.

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<sup>78</sup> Bland and Backhouse, *China Under the Empress*, 1-2.

<sup>79</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 2.

<sup>81</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 7, 40.

<sup>82</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 17.

However, while each of the aforementioned authors dedicated only a few pages to describing Cixi's father, Hussey spends roughly fifty pages, making his story by far the longest and most detailed. He begins by describing "Hwei Cheng [as a degenerate] who frequented gambling houses and [visited] brothels," but had somehow, "after years of intrigue and using the influence of his cousin [...] and that of his other friends, [...] succeeded in securing an official position [and] was appointed Commissioner for River Conservancy in the city of Ch'en Chow Fu in Honan province." After a relatively short period of time, "by making himself appear a man of wide experience and wisdom, Hwei Cheng succeeded in securing another promotion, that of military Tao T'ai of the five Fu districts in Anhwei province."<sup>83</sup> Up to this point, nothing presented here directly contradicts the accounts given by the seven authors in the previous two paragraphs. This however, is all about to change in the subsequent narratives.

According to Hussey, "the snob in Hwei Cheng was beginning to show, as was his love for money," just after he assumed the aforementioned post of military Tao T'ai. This would prove detrimental when "one night in Wuhu," in his new headquarters in Anhui, he fell panic stricken to the possibility that his "city would be captured by the Tai Ping rebels" because "Hung Hsiu-ch'uan and his Tai Ping armies [...] began to sweep northward." In the face of this coming threat,

The idea occurred to him that if the city was going to be captured, looted, and destroyed, the rebels would also take the government gold and silver that were in the strongbox. Why should he not take them first? With the city destroyed, no one would know who had taken it; all would believe that the gold and silver had been seized by the rebels.

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<sup>83</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 3, 29, 44.

He thus proceeded to steal the funds and flee, but “it did not take long to trace” him, and soon afterwards, “he and his whole family were put into prison, [although] his family was released” later on. Cixi’s father, however, was not so lucky, and would die while still incarcerated, albeit of natural causes as opposed to execution. At that time Cixi was no longer a child, but rather a young woman at the age of at least sixteen.<sup>84</sup>

Unlike the short stories about Cixi’s father provided by the other Western authors, Hussey’s detailed account allows him to fully develop “Hwei Cheng’s” character, identifying him as a man who began his life as a degenerate and ended it as a criminal. The image of him presented here is certainly not a favorable one, and is in many ways detrimental to his daughter, Cixi’s reputation. This is something that Hussey seems fully aware of, claiming “the fact [that] her father died in prison for a serious crime against the government” is one reason why so little is known about her today. According to Hussey, “the first thing Empress Tz’u Hsi did when she secured power was to attempt to destroy every record of her early life” in order to cover-up this embarrassing history. The actions she took to hide her past seem even more relevant because if her father was tried as a criminal before his death, or that if he was still alive in prison, she probably would never have had the chance to become an imperial concubine. Certainly, “the governor would hardly have dared to recommend [to the emperor] the daughter of an official then in jail.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, any person who is related to a convicted felon would never have had the opportunity to marry into the Imperial Harem. While this story seems plausible and helps explain why the knowledge of Cixi’s childhood and adolescence is so obscure, it is only valuable if it is accurate.

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<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*, 45, 48-49, 50, 51-52.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv, 50-51, 60.

A closer look at Hussey's account, however, raises a number of questions about his use of sources. Again, it will be stressed that while he claims to have based his work on "government records of [Cixi's] father's and mother's family," he does not properly reference a single one in his description of "Hwei Cheng's" life.<sup>86</sup> This suggests that his tale may have been fabricated, perhaps for the explicit purpose of slandering Cixi by falsely building a negative perception of herself and her family. This suspicion prompted Seagrave to argue that the work of "Harry Hussey [is] among the most malignant and damaging to the historical image of the empress dowager."<sup>87</sup> Why would someone like Hussey want to demonize Her Majesty? While this question is important, the answer will have to wait until Chapter Three as there is yet another side of the story that needs to be reviewed here.

As if writing from an entirely different universe, Der Ling's description of Cixi's father is the exact opposite of everything that the aforementioned writers claimed. Rather than being the brothel-frequenting degenerate and criminal described by Hussey, she says that "Her father [was a great man], long since retired from his country's service, with the rank, title and emoluments of a General, [whose happy] wife [...] would look at this man who had been beside her down the endless avenues of the years, and smile" at the memories. Nor did he die an early death when his child was just a young little girl, as Backhouse, Bland, and Varè have thought. As Der Ling claimed, he was still alive when the edict nominating his daughter as a candidate for Xianfeng's imperial concubines arrived, as he apparently "read it [and] performed the kowtows decreed by custom" when

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<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>87</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 459.

receiving such an honorable order.<sup>88</sup> The account given here completely contradicts all of the stories outlined earlier.

Can Der Ling be trusted? Is her work reliable? Much like the other authors discussed thus far, she does not provide any citations in her biography about Cixi either. But does she need to? As she explains,

For almost three years I was a favorite of Her Majesty, and I say this without egotism, in an attempt to show my own right to tell the story I have told here. Old Buddha made me her confidante on many occasions, and this book is based upon what she herself told me.<sup>89</sup>

Having served as her lady-in-waiting, she certainly had a privileged level of access to information on Cixi when compared to the average authors in the West. Yet this does not mean that her account can be taken without caution since it was built upon her own self-made claims, and especially when it contradicts almost everything else that was discussed, including the earlier description given by Headland, who had an intimate connection to the Imperial family. Does this necessarily mean that Der Ling's story is a fraud? That is impossible to prove, but the possibility does warrant the need to keep caution when examining her writing. This issue also prompts another question: if Der Ling did make these narratives up, then for what reason? The answer, just like the one with Hussey's case, has to be left to Chapter Three.

The discrepancy in regards to Cixi's name during her childhood and adolescence is another issue among these popular authors in the West. Headland identified young Cixi as "little Miss Chao," but he failed to explain if this was how her family and peers actually addressed her in her childhood, or if this was a name that he came up with

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<sup>88</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 1, 11.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, vii; "Old Buddha" is one of Cixi's nicknames.

himself. What is clear is that he attributed the same surname to her father.<sup>90</sup> Varè agreed with Headland by confirming that “as a child, [people] called her ‘the Little Chao’.”<sup>91</sup> However, his claim was contradicted by the works of other authors, such as Der Ling and Hussey.

In contrast to Headland and Varè, Der Ling claims that throughout Cixi’s early life, she was known as “the Orchid,” or “Lan Kuei,” in Chinese.<sup>92</sup> Collis also agreed with this, but he stressed that “Orchid [was] only a pet name” and not her real name.<sup>93</sup> These claims were in turn challenged by Hussey, who explains that since her birth, “to the mother she was always [called] Ta Ts’ui [of which] the English equivalent [is] Green Jade.”<sup>94</sup> Which of these three names was correct? To make the issue even more complicated, Bland and Backhouse assert that Cixi “was born Yehonala” back “in November 1835.”<sup>95</sup> Varè would, however, dispute this, arguing that it was not until “her youth [that] she bore the name of Yehonala, which was that of her clan.”<sup>96</sup> Likewise, Seagrave indicates that “in 1851, when at the age of sixteen she [Cixi] was chosen to be an imperial concubine, she was referred to only as Lady Yehenara, from the name of her Manchu clan, the Yehe tribe of the Nara clan.”<sup>97</sup>

While it is certainly possible that Cixi was given more than one name at birth, it seems unlikely that she had this many. Hence, it is necessary to ask, which if any, of the

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<sup>90</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 9, 11.

<sup>91</sup> Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 2.

<sup>92</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 1.

<sup>93</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 45.

<sup>94</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 7.

<sup>95</sup> Bland and Backhouse, *China Under the Empress*, 1.

<sup>96</sup> Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 19.

names listed above are correct? And if none of them are right, then what did people call her? As with everything else in relation to Cixi's childhood and adolescence, the answers to these questions will probably never be known, nor would the work of academic scholars help to answer them either. Thus, Seagrave bluntly concludes that she was a woman so mysterious that "we do not even know her name" at birth.<sup>98</sup>

Controversy surrounding Cixi's early life goes far beyond what has been reviewed here, but to include everything in this short subsection is both impossible and unnecessary, as the fact that her childhood and adolescence remains a mystery, despite the many publications attempting to explore it, has already been established here. Especially in regards to her father's identity, some, if not all of the aforementioned authors must be wrong since a couple of entirely opposing accounts have been presented by them. The purpose of this study, however, is not so much to determine which of their facts are correct, but rather to identify the social and political forces that have enticed some of these authors to fabricate claims, a task that will be addressed in the third chapter. For now, it is necessary to examine the discrepancies in the next major episode of the Empress' life, which relates to her roles in the birth and death of her son, Emperor Tongzhi.

### ***Controversies over Cixi and Her Son, Emperor Tongzhi***

As one Western biographer of Cixi, Haldane asserts, "the birth of her son, heir to the Dragon Throne, was the luckiest event that ever befell Yehonala, [since it was] the

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<sup>98</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 18.

‘Open Sesame’ to the absolute power she in due course achieved.”<sup>99</sup> However, as Seagrave explains, the death of her son at a young age was also the most tragic event in her personal life, and “Tzu Hsi was always reticent about her son thereafter.”<sup>100</sup> Cixi’s roles in the birth and death of Emperor Tongzhi have been the major subjects in many Western publications, but the accounts that they provide are highly inconsistent with one another. Because facts may have been fabricated to fill the knowledge void, it is important to look closely at what authors of popular literature have written about the Empress and her beloved child.

Expectedly, Cixi was overjoyed when her son, the future Emperor Tongzhi, was born, but so were many others.<sup>101</sup> This is because, as Keith Laidler explains, “the Celestial Prince’s prime duty was to sire a son to secure the succession [...] for without an undisputed heir [upon his death], dissension was sure to arise, and with it the risk of civil war” that could tear the entire country apart.<sup>102</sup> To contextualize the situation, up until the moment of Tongzhi’s birth, as Der Ling pointed out, neither “the Empress of Hsien Feng, nor all his concubines, had borne the Great Man an heir.”<sup>103</sup> (As Jung Chang noted, even though “Emperor Xianfeng [already] had [a] daughter by this time, [she] was not entitled to carry the dynastic line” as only men were eligible to do so.)<sup>104</sup> Thus, “there was wild excitement all over China when the word went forth that Lan Kuei had borne a son.” As Der Ling continues, “the Emperor burned incense, set off firecrackers, and was

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<sup>99</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 25.

<sup>100</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 134.

<sup>101</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 136.

<sup>103</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 17.

very proud and very happy in the birth of a son to succeed him, and to worship at his grave.”<sup>105</sup> While nothing reported here appears out of the ordinary, the literature includes other accounts about what actually happened.

Showing scepticism about the child’s paternity, Haldane asks: “who did in fact father this male baby, who only a few years later became the ruler of the Celestial Empire?” As she continues, “Could the father of this important infant have been Jung Lu, Yehonala’s former fiancé?”<sup>106</sup> To answer this question, Rong Lu’s background needs to be examined, but as with Cixi, even the basic information about him is often contradictory in Western literature.

As Headland indicates, “Jung Lu [was the] Governor-General of the metropolitan province of Chili” in his later life, but what was he before that and what was his relationship with Cixi?<sup>107</sup> Prior to becoming an Imperial Concubine, Cixi was said to have been in love with him, and according to Der Ling, “the world stood still” whenever “they sought each other’s arms” during their younger years.<sup>108</sup> Continuing with this argument, historian Kenneth Scott Latourette stated that “she gave up the chance of marrying her girlhood friend, Jung Lu,” by “entering the imperial palace” and becoming one of Xianfeng’s concubines.<sup>109</sup> If this was actually the case, it would help explain the questions outlined in the previous paragraph. But even if this love story was true, how did they even meet in the first place? The answer to this question lies with Haldane, who provides a rather animated explanation, claiming that they knew each other simply

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<sup>105</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 45, 46.

<sup>106</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 25, 26.

<sup>107</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 47.

<sup>108</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 7.

<sup>109</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, “Introduction,” in *Flight of an Empress*, by Wu-Yung, vii-xiv (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936), viii.

because they were relatives and betrothed to each other, although “at what age they first met is uncertain.” As she describes, “the young relative chosen to become Orchid’s future husband was [...] a cousin whose name was Jung Lu,” who “fell deeply and permanently in love with Orchid” “when the cousins first met.”<sup>110</sup> The key idea here is that this romance never ended, and continued in secret for years behind Emperor Xianfeng’s back.

As Haldane sees it, because Cixi was already married, “Jung Lu, who was never to be her husband, became her lover [instead, and] their assignations were arranged by the Chief Eunuch, An-te-hai.” This romance eventually led to their conception of a child, albeit without ever raising the Emperor’s suspicion or catching his attention, but how? As Haldane continues, “Hsien Feng was twenty-five at the time of becoming a parent, and [was] already half paralysed owing, it was said, to the life of debauchery he had been leading [...] for the past ten years.” Thus “it might not have been impossible to persuade him that he was the child’s father, or to agree to allow the world to believe this to be so, if he knew himself, by then to be impotent.”<sup>111</sup> If this story was true, and the birth of Tongzhi was actually the result of adultery, Cixi’s reputation could have been harmed. This brings into question whether or not the account was a fairytale fabricated for the purpose of slander. If Seagrave was asked, he would definitely answer “yes,” as he discovered that “there is no evidence of any kind to support this [claim, since] Jung Lu came from a different clan [than Cixi], so if he was a cousin it was of the most distant variety,” but the theories do not end there.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 19.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 25, 26.

<sup>112</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 102.

Collis also questioned Tongzhi's parentage, but his theory was totally different. He claimed that since "Hsien Feng was incapable of begetting an heir, [Cixi had] to procure one by some other means [and] in 1856 she procured a child from a woman of the people, whom she successfully passed off as the Emperor's child by her."<sup>113</sup> Haldane however, completely dismissed this argument, stating that "this invention [that] Yehonala never gave birth to a child at all, but bought a male heir from an ordinary Chinese woman [...] and passed on this child as her own" "is almost too absurd to mention," yet the explanation she gave, as discussed in the previous paragraph, does not appear to be any more credible.<sup>114</sup>

All of this confusion aside however, "there is no evidence to be found that Hsien Feng ever questioned the paternity of his heir," so why should we? In response to any claims that Xianfeng could not sire children, Hussey provides this explanation:

With the mistake some foreign writers have made in stating that Emperor Hsien Feng and his friends spent most of their nights in houses of prostitution, they also made the mistake of declaring that he had contracted there a social disease. They have given as evidence of this that he had only one child, evidently forgetting that many healthy men had no children at all. In fact, Hsien Feng had not one but three—two sons and a daughter [although] the younger son [...] died at an early age.<sup>115</sup>

Nevertheless, as Chapter Two will show, this debate on Tongzhi's parentage has continued to present day through the work of Lailder, Seagrave, and Warner.<sup>116</sup> It seems that recent authors are just as divided upon this issue as the early writers were.

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<sup>113</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 8.

<sup>114</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 26.

<sup>115</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 89, 97.

<sup>116</sup> Lailder, *The Last Empress*, 139; Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 24; Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 30.

In addition to Tongzhi's birth, his death also needs to be examined because it is shrouded in controversy over Cixi. How exactly did he die? The simplest answer is given by Headland, who states that "the young monarch contracted smallpox and died without issue."<sup>117</sup> If this is true, then the loss of Cixi's son thus seems to have been an innocent tragedy, but not everyone agrees with this. Collis in particular, provides a totally different explanation, suggesting that the Emperor did not succumb to illness, but had instead, been murdered.<sup>118</sup>

Against Cixi's wishes, Tongzhi selected Alute to be his wife the same year he took over the reins of government from his mother. While this happy union resulted in the conception of a child and seemed harmless on the surface, in many ways it severely threatened Cixi's base of power and created a lot of tension within the imperial family, enough so that she ended up murdering her own flesh and blood. As Collis explained, although

Dynastic law required that the administration be handed over to [her son] and that the regency be dissolved [...], Tzu Hsi had no intention of retiring into obscurity and took a series of measures to meet the situation. After failing to marry the Emperor to a nominee of her own, through whom she planned to control him, and, in spite of the semi-imprisonment in which she detained him, being unable to keep him wholly separated from the woman whom he had made his Empress, she caused him to be murdered in 1875, when it had become clear that his wife was with child and that the two of them were determined to assert their rights [as rulers].<sup>119</sup>

Assuming that this theory is correct, how then, was he actually killed?

With the help of her chief eunuch, Li Lien-Ying, Cixi had apparently tried more than once to dispose of her son. Being kept from his wife, as Collis explained, Tongzhi

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<sup>117</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 40.

<sup>118</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 8.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 93, 103.

began to “disguise [himself and] went to the Chinese City” to seek sexual pleasure, and although “the Empress Dowager was told, [she] chose not to interfere” because these nightly escapades provided her with a perfect chance to have him murdered. Sure enough, “one night [he was] attacked on the way home” by “Li Lien-Ying’s men in disguise,” although they failed to kill him. Furthermore, she presumably allowed Tongzhi to continue indulging in the excesses outside of the palace since “she was [probably] not sorry [that he] ran the risk of catching a dangerous disease” that could claim his life naturally. Indeed, “the Emperor [eventually suffered] an attack of smallpox,” but fortunately for him, he survived it and soon “appeared to be much better,” yet his safety was still far from assured as his mother was not one to give up so easily.<sup>120</sup>

Since her initial plans failed, as Collis continued, Cixi resorted to having Tongzhi murdered in cold blood. After finding out that she was “going to be a Grandmother,” she called to have her son executed, apparently shouting, “Off with him! I do not wish to see him again!” When Li Lien-Ying responded “that an order is still required” before he could carry out such a deed, she asked, “Have you not issued the order? Surely it was implied when I said I did not wish to see him again.” With that, he left to fulfill this command before returning later to announce that “all [of] Your Majesty’s orders have been carried out.” Upon hearing this, Cixi falsely declared “His Majesty [had] passed away without issue,” as “the [smallpox] disease ran its course and he [finally] mounted the Dragon and ascended to Heaven.”<sup>121</sup>

So here lies Collis’ explanation of Tongzhi’s death, but how believable is it? No citations were provided to indicate which sources this story was developed from, making

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 105, 109, 115.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 111, 112, 113, 115.

it extremely difficult to authenticate. Nor has it been widely repeated by many authors since, although Hussey's account does contain some similarities, as he also stressed that Cixi did not get along with her son's wife, explaining that "within a week after the wedding Aluteh, now known as Empress Hsiao Cheh, clashed with her imperial and imperious mother-in-law." As the following discussion will show, this feud would have disastrous outcomes.<sup>122</sup>

According to Hussey, friction quickly built within the royal family, and Cixi "developed a [...] hatred of Hsiao Cheh." Soon "she was more determined than ever that Hsiao Cheh should not become the mother of the next emperor [and Cixi proceeded] to do everything to keep Hsiao Cheh from her husband." Without much chance to stay with his wife, Tongzhi began to search for sexual stimulation elsewhere, which unfortunately led him to begin "visiting disguised brothels in the West City," whereby he tragically "contracted the [syphilis] disease which ultimately caused his death." From there on, as the story continues,

When Tz'u Hsi next visited the Emperor she was shocked to see him suffering from open sores [and] cursed Hsiao Cheh for not taking better care of the Emperor. Hsiao Cheh [then] reminded her that she herself had put a ban on the Emperor visiting her and that the ban was still being enforced by her eunuchs.<sup>123</sup>

This account still blames the tragedy on Cixi, although it did not directly charge that she murdered her own son. While this is indeed a less cynical account than the one provided in Collis' book, it still presents a rather unappealing image of Her Majesty though Hussey also gave no supportive evidence.

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<sup>122</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 183.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 183, 199, 202, 203-204.

Hussey then further emphasizes Cixi's fault in this tragedy by stating that "without doubt her neglect and her behavior toward him and his Empress were the most important contributing causes of his contracting the disease," which is why she "is often accused of having caused the death of her son."<sup>124</sup> Both accounts of Tongzhi's demise portray his mother negatively, but can either of them be trusted? They certainly run counter to the views expressed by Sergeant, who explained that there is "no real ground for branding China's greatest woman ruler with the stigma of so black a crime" as "the murder of one's own son," and by Der Ling, who placed Her Majesty under a much better light.<sup>125</sup>

As Der Ling argued, "Tzu Hsi loved Tung Chih as few mothers love their sons," and thus "the charge that she slew him, by slow poisoning, or any other way, in order to reassume the regency, is one of the basest lies." "That he did die of smallpox is the exact truth, no less," since "she loved him, she worshiped him, and that she killed him is unthinkable."<sup>126</sup> This account of the tragedy involves no hint of malicious intent or foul play. The Emperor simply got sick and succumbed to the illness. Is this story, however, more believable? Seagrave obviously thinks so: "smallpox had been epidemic in China for generations," so it should not be viewed as a surprise for any individual to contract it, even if that person was of royalty.<sup>127</sup>

So here we have three different accounts of Tongzhi's death, with each seemingly contradicting the others. Of course it would be interesting to find out which, if any, is actually true. More important to this study, however, is the fact that at least two of these

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>125</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 100.

<sup>126</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 170, 171.

<sup>127</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 136.

stories must be false. Thus, it is necessary to find out why the differences arose in the first place. This task will be fulfilled in the third chapter, but for now, it is important to spare a moment to look at how Alute's life ended, since it too is the subject of much controversy in Western popular literature on Cixi.

If Alute was pregnant when her husband died, then she was slated to become the next dowager empress, which would greatly reduce the power of her mother-in-law.<sup>128</sup> But even if Cixi was not destined to have a grandchild inherit the throne, she would still have to step aside in favour of her son's widow as "the procedure to be followed" under "the Household Rules of the Ch'ing Dynasty, [...] was for Empress Hsiao Cheh to adopt an heir to her husband to succeed him on the Dragon Throne" since "Tung Chih left no heir, and as far as was known had not designated his successor." Obviously this never happened, but if it had, as Hussey notes, "this arrangement would have made Hsiao Cheh mother of the adopted son and so Empress Dowager of China, relegating Tz'u Hsi to the position of Grand Empress Dowager, a position of great respect but without the slightest power in the government." Being forced to relinquish power was certainly something that "Tz'u Hsi was determined should not happen [even] if she had to break every rule of the Ch'ing Dynasty and every law in China to prevent it."<sup>129</sup> In other words, Her Majesty was prepared to go to whatever lengths necessary to preserve her authority, but what exactly did she do?

"A few days later" after Tongzhi's death, as Varè explained, "A-lu-te died, with her child still unborn, [and] in the market-places and in the tea-houses, people asked each

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<sup>128</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 82.

<sup>129</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 205, 206.

other: ‘Was it suicide or foul play?’”<sup>130</sup> If asked this question Der Ling would answer “both,” as she claimed that Cixi had pressured her daughter-in-law into committing suicide by telling her that “when a wife loves her husband, loves him more than life, and the husband dies, it is not a disgrace to follow him [and] to follow him, the wife must have courage [and] I know you are very brave.” Needless to say, “she committed suicide before her child was born,” which is exactly what Her Majesty wanted, since

There was no way of telling, of course, whether the expected child were male or female. If female, Tzu Hsi might still be regent; if male, he would be the heir, and Tung Chih’s wife would become Empress Dowager. It was a chance Tzu Hsi did not care to take.<sup>131</sup>

This story illustrates Cixi as a cold hearted woman who would trade the death of family members, including her unborn grandchild, just to remain in power, but is it true? Perhaps the fact that a similar version of it was repeated twenty years later by Hussey would serve to confirm its authenticity.

As Hussey claimed, “on the seventy-fourth day after the death of T’ung Chih, Hsiao Chieh deliberately committed suicide by what the Chinese called ‘eating gold’ [whereby] she swallowed mercury.” The key here however, is that she only did this because Cixi “suggested that as T’ung Chih had actually died of a horrible disease the unborn child would also have that disease [of which] would bring sorrow to the mother and to her entire family,” leading to the ultimate “decision [...] that Hsiao Cheh should commit suicide in order that she and her unborn child could accompany T’ung Chih into the celestial regions” and eliminate any unnecessary grief.<sup>132</sup> While this account differs a

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<sup>130</sup> Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 122.

<sup>131</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 171, 172.

<sup>132</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 212-213.

little from Der Ling's, it still follows the idea that Alute was pressured into killing herself, but not everyone would agree with it.

Headland in particular wrote that even Alute's "closest relatives did not believe, as has often been suggested, that there was any 'foul play' in regard to her death, [which] is evident from the fact that her father continued to hold office until the time of the Boxer Uprising." This suggests his continued loyalty in the Imperial Court. Thus it might not have been forced suicide that took the life of Tongzhi's "young wife who [on her own] heeded literally the instruction of one of their female teachers in her duty to her husband to [...] 'be buried with him, as in life you shared his guilt'."<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, Johnston would argue that Cixi had absolutely no motive to kill her daughter-in-law since "if she survived the emperor and became senior to his successor by two generations, she would qualify for the still higher rank of *T'ai-huang-t'ai-hou* or 'Grand' empress-dowager." This would award her with even more authority than that of

an empress-dowager [who already] took precedence [over] the reigning emperor and empress [so much] that when the emperor and empress visited either an empress-dowager or a *t'ai fei*, or received her in one of their own palaces, they could not sit in her presence until she invited them to do so.<sup>134</sup>

In other words, if this is true, then Cixi's power was in no way threatened by her son's widow, which means that Hussey's assumption that she wished for her death must be incorrect.

Just like the hearsays about Tongzhi, there is a great deal of discrepancy surrounding how his wife died. Did she voluntarily commit suicide, or was she persuaded

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<sup>133</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 40.

<sup>134</sup> Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, 28-29.

to take her own life by Cixi? Or, as some of the later writers that will appear in Chapter Two have suggested, was she murdered by her mother-in-law instead? That there is so much confusion regarding Alute's death should not however, be surprising as it was an issue that had already been recognized over a century ago by Sergeant back in 1911, who explained that when

Ahluta herself died [...] the tales were various. Some said her sorrow as a widow induced her to refuse food until at last she died of starvation; others [said] that she took her own life by more violent means; while among the Chinese in particular many believed that there was foul play. Those most hostile to Tze-hi made her personally bring to her daughter-in-law a poisoned cup and force her to drink it. No evidence is forthcoming for or against this most sensational version of the story.<sup>135</sup>

Whether any of these claims are true may never be known, but that some of them are false, is pretty certain. Determining which is right however, is not of great importance here. Instead, the real issue is why such fabricated or inaccurate stories exist, and an explanation for this will be provided later on.

### ***Western Records of Cixi's Later Life and Emperor Guangxu***

Compared to her childhood and adolescence, Cixi's later life seems to be much better documented. Consequently, authors of Western popular literature are fairly consistent in their narratives. This, however, should not come as a surprise since foreigners began to have direct contact with her after 1898, meaning that information about her, from then onwards, could be more accurate.<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, there are still

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<sup>135</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 108-109.

<sup>136</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 59, 90, 201.

controversies over some key issues in Cixi's final years, such as her relations with her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor, and her role in the subsequent Boxer fiasco.

Before 1898, when Prince Henry of Prussia, the "Rear-Admiral, Second in Command of the German Cruiser Squadron in China," presented himself to Cixi, "no European had, in the past, ever stood before a Chinese Empress." In regards to this special meeting, the prince wrote, "I had the opportunity of visiting Peking [on May 15] and of being admitted to an audience before the late Empress Dowager."<sup>137</sup> As Hayter-Menzies explains, this was "Cixi's first known meeting with a foreign male," which already makes it significant "because until [it happened,] few in the West really knew enough about her, if they had ever heard of her at all, to have any cogent sense of her."<sup>138</sup> But more importantly, it broke the "long-established customs [which] concealed [...] Chinese ladies from contact with the foreigners" and set the precedent for more encounters of this sort to come in the future.<sup>139</sup> The next occurred just later that same year: "Sarah [Conger] and the wives of six other foreign ministers [were] invited by the Empress Dowager for an audience in Zhongnanhai, the Sea Palaces complex" to see Cixi "on the frigid morning of December 13, 1898."<sup>140</sup> After direct contact between Her Imperial Majesty and Westerners commenced, slowly but surely, knowledge about her in the outside world became more widespread. This however, does not mean that the records of her later life are entirely complete. In these Western records, many aspects of her life remain a mystery, notably with her treatment of Guangxu after the 1898 Reform and her involvement in the Boxer Uprising.

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<sup>137</sup> Prince Henry as quoted in Bland and Backhouse, *China Under the Empress*, v.

<sup>138</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 59, 61, 90.

<sup>139</sup> Conger, *Letters from China*, 316.

<sup>140</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 59.

The Guangxu Emperor, as already discussed, was an ambitious individual who tried to reform China in 1898, yet his efforts were thwarted by Cixi, his conservative minded aunt who came out of retirement to resume her control of the Qing court. How exactly did this actually happen? Did Cixi forcefully seize the throne from her nephew, or did he willfully step down? This question remains without a solid answer in Western literature on Cixi, and it demonstrates the extent of the fuzziness surrounding Her Majesty, which pertains to her later life as well as to her early years.

One story has it that Guangxu, fully aware of his aunt's conservative nature, understood that his reforms could never be successfully completed so long as she was free to interfere with his efforts. Thus, he had to take pre-emptive action. According to Headland,

The Emperor [...] sent a courier post-haste to call [general] Yüan Shih-kai for an interview at the palace [and] when Yüan came, he ordered him to [...] bring the army corps of 12,500 troops of which he was in charge to Peking, surround the Summer Palace preventing, anyone from going in or coming out, thus making the Empress Dowager a prisoner, and allowing him to go on with his work of reform.

The problem, however, was that Yuan refused to go through with the plan and instead “went to Jung Lu [and] showed him the order, [and the latter then] showed the order to Her Majesty, suggesting to her that it might be well for her to come into the city and give [her nephew] a few lessons in government.” She apparently responded by having “Kuang Hsü [...] put in prison [in] his winter palace, where, for many months, he was confined in a gilded cage of a house, on a small island, with the Empress Dowager's eunuchs to guard him,” while she “took control of the affairs of state” and returned to

power.<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, the Empress was apparently so devoted to punishing her nephew that she made sure he suffered as much as possible. As Conger notes, “it is rumored that more eunuchs were put to death for taking, without permission, warm clothing to the Emperor, who is in prison.”<sup>142</sup>

The story that the Emperor was apparently locked up by his own aunt is agreed upon by many writers, including Sergeant who described in detail that

The Emperor had been conveyed to the Iho Park, and that he was a close prisoner on an island in the ornamental waters there; or that he was a captive in one of the island-palaces on the Lotus Lake in the Forbidden City, cut off from the mainland by a raised drawbridge and guarded by imperial eunuchs.<sup>143</sup>

Bland and Backhouse also agreed with this view, stating that “Kuang Hsü’s reign was over [...] from the day the pitiful monarch entered his pavilion prison.”<sup>144</sup> Der Ling then continued this argument by explaining that “Kuang Hsu [was] destined henceforth to be a pitiful prisoner of his own palace,” being “banished to Ying Tai, a little island in Nan Hai, which is part of the Winter Palace.”<sup>145</sup> Collis also provided a very similar account, explaining that when Cixi’s “secret police, composed of eunuchs under the control of Li Lien-Ying, her Chief Eunuch, informed her” that “the Emperor Kuang Hsu [had planned] a coup against his aunt, the terrible dowager [...], she arrested Kuang Hsu and confined him on an island situation on a lake within the Imperial City.”<sup>146</sup> This whole argument, however, is pulled back a little by Hussey who offers a slight correction by

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<sup>141</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 146, 147, 153.

<sup>142</sup> Conger, *Letters from China*, 26.

<sup>143</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 191-192.

<sup>144</sup> Bland and Backhouse, *China Under the Empress*, 145.

<sup>145</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 215, 217.

<sup>146</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 10.

pointing out that Guangxu “was arrested and lodged in the Ocean Terrace [which] was a beautiful little palace on an island in the Nan Hai—a palace, not a prison.”<sup>147</sup>

Nonetheless, aside from the slight disagreements here, the authors just discussed all agree with the fact that Cixi had confined and incarcerated the Emperor.

Out of this comes another question: for how long was Guangxu imprisoned? According to Headland, “from 1898 until his death, [the Emperor] was a prisoner.”<sup>148</sup> In contrast, Bland and Backhouse argued that “Kuang Hsü [faced] eighteen months of solitary confinement [...] on the ‘Ocean Terrace’.”<sup>149</sup> Their claim was also supported by Der Ling, who wrote that “for almost two years Kwang Hsu was a prisoner on Ying Tai.”<sup>150</sup> Hussey then combined these various arguments together and explained that “he was [...] a virtual prisoner until the flight from Peking in 1900 [but] on his return, he chose to take up his residence there again [on Ying Tai], and there he remained until his death eight years later,” giving the impression that he died a prisoner, although he may have chose to stay in isolation for the final years of his life.<sup>151</sup> Before even attempting to come to any sort of conclusion about this issue, an entirely different narrative needs to be considered first.

In direct contrast with the authors just discussed, Carl maintained that Cixi never mistreated “the nephew she had brought up through a delicate boyhood and whom she cherished as her own son!” What happened was that while he had indeed pushed for reform, the Emperor himself soon realized:

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<sup>147</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 263.

<sup>148</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 316.

<sup>149</sup> Bland and Backhouse, *China Under the Empress*, 144.

<sup>150</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 220.

<sup>151</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 263.

[H]e had been over sanguine in hoping to realize at once his enthusiastic dreams for the immediate rehabilitation of China's prestige; he saw that his ardent desire for progress was not enough, and that to hope to reform in a few years the century old traditions of his most conservative people was but the wild unrealizable dream of youth, and absolutely impracticable."

According to Carl, it was for this reason that Cixi returned to power and "became once more the real Ruler of China." But the key here is that "[the] Emperor's authority was not wrested from him—he was not deposed [and] he still remained the Emperor of China."<sup>152</sup> In other words, realizing the need to correct the many mistakes that he had made, Guangxu was obligated to accept his aunt's resumption of control over the empire.

Nonetheless, Carl recognized that various reports about what happened to Guangxu were circulating. Cixi "was reported to have imprisoned him, [or was trying] to starve him to death," but Carl rejected these reports, explaining that

Time has shown [that] these reports [are false], for, had she so desired, she would have had no difficulty in accomplishing his death. She had any number of instruments at her hand, fanatically loyal to her and ready to carry out any of her wishes.

To put it in simpler terms, her nephew would not have retained his position as Emperor, nor would he have even been alive for that matter, if Cixi did not desire it. In Carl's opinion, the Empress Dowager would have preferred for her nephew to continue governing China on his own if he was capable of doing so. She was "really anxious to retire [but] feels the time has not yet come." It is for this reason that despite her resumption of power, "she [only] 'assists' the Emperor in ruling" as opposed to doing it herself.<sup>153</sup> This perspective has been taken by several recent writers as well, such as

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<sup>152</sup> Carl, *With the Empress Dowager*, 260, 261, 262.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-263.

Seagrave, whose views will be discussed in the next chapter, and Sue Fawn Chung, who noted

that although Tz'u-hsi held the position of greater authority after September 1898, the Kuang-hsu Emperor sat on the throne with her; issued his own personal edicts; made comments on secret memorials, some of which eventually were transformed into policy statements; and, according to eyewitness accounts, not only replied to officials when addressed in court but also initiated discussions with officials in court.<sup>154</sup>

Carl's account however, is very different from the explanation given by Hussey four decades later for why Cixi spared her nephew's life. He instead argued that "it was through no kindness of heart that Tz'u Hsi did not execute the Emperor. Had she done so she would have been compelled to appoint a successor to him—a prince who might menace her authority" and cause even more problems. The alternative was, of course, to "allow him to retain his throne, but he would be kept a prisoner and she would handle all government affairs [as] he was allowed to see no one."<sup>155</sup> In accordance to this view, Guangxu was placed in confinement only because he was still a useful puppet for Cixi.

When combined, the accounts discussed above do nothing to clarify what happened to Cixi's relations with Guangxu during and after the 1898 Reform. Taken together, they only make understanding their relations more complicated as their discrepancies bring forth many puzzling questions. Firstly, did Cixi force her nephew out of power? Secondly, if she did, was he imprisoned as a result? Lastly, if he was, for how long was he kept in confinement? The fact that none of these questions could be

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<sup>154</sup> Sue Fawn Chung, "The Image of the Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi," in *Reform in Nineteenth-Century China*, eds. Paul A. Cohen and John E. Schrecker, 101-110 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 102.

<sup>155</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 264.

answered unanimously by these authors again points to the overall confusion about Cixi, even in her later life when Westerners began to have direct contact with her.

With Guangxu sidelined, Cixi resumed power for ten more years. The last decade of her reign first received intensive Western attention because of her role in the anti-foreign Boxer movement around 1900. This is an issue that has been heavily debated amongst Western writers. Bland and Backhouse blamed the Boxer movement entirely on Cixi:

[When] the junior Chinese Member of the Council, Chao Shu-ch'iao [...] begged the Old Buddha to issue her orders for the immediate extermination of every foreigner in the interior, [...] Her Majesty commanded the Grand Council to consider this suggestion and to memorialise in due course for an Edict.

Shortly after, “she [...] ordered the promulgation of the Decree, for immediate communication to all parts of the Empire.”<sup>156</sup>

These “details came from the secret *Ching Shan diary*,” claimed the two Western authors, but Seagrave, in following various academic experts, has pointed out “the *Ching Shan diary* was fake,” and he even charged that “Backhouse had invented the *Ching Shan diary*.”<sup>157</sup> Just as a point of reference, the actual diary, albeit forged, states that “Grand Councillor Chao Shu-ch'iao [...] requested the Old Buddha to issue an edict for the immediate extermination of every missionary [...] living in the interior” and “the Empress then ordered the immediate promulgation of the Edict, declaring war” on the Western powers.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Bland and Backhouse, *China Under the Empress*, 182-183.

<sup>157</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 207; Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 385-386, 447, 449-450; Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 180.

<sup>158</sup> Ching-shan, *Diary of His Excellency Ching-shan: Being a Chinese Account of the Boxer Troubles*, trans. J. J. L. Duyvendak (Arlington, VA: University publications of America, Inc., 1976), 26, 27.

Based on such forged documents, however, Bland and Backhouse held Cixi responsible for starting the Boxer fiasco. Nonetheless, Der Ling similarly blamed the conflict on Cixi, claiming that she “ushered in the Boxer Horror” when “she pronounced the fatal words” commanding the anti-foreign militias to “fire on the legations at daybreak!”<sup>159</sup> Hussey and also subscribed to this view, claiming that a “decree was secretly sent [by Cixi] to the [...] governors, ordering them to destroy foreigners.”<sup>160</sup> Thus, these authors all appear quite certain of Cixi’s responsibility for starting the violence in 1900.

Der Ling, in spite of her close relationship with Cixi, was also critical of the latter for instigating the Boxer Uprising since it was targeted against defenceless foreigners. “Against the red glow of that first unforgettable dawn after the fatal words of Tzu Hsi,” as she describes, came “the first fires of destruction, as the Boxers touched torches to the houses of foreigners.” Before long, as she continues, “the Boxers [were] hemming in the beleaguered foreigners—who were already short of food, and whose ammunition was already being doled out,” meaning that they were completely unable to protect themselves.<sup>161</sup> Thus, Der Ling makes it clear that Cixi was mercilessly destructive and unduly aggressive against the Westerners living in China, and for that reason, should be condemned for her part in this conflict.

While many authors blamed Cixi for her role in starting the Boxer conflict, some of them were somewhat sympathetic with her for doing so. As already mentioned in the introduction, Hussey suggests that her actions, although aggressive, were in part

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<sup>159</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 249.

<sup>160</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 282.

<sup>161</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 257, 261.

excusable because they were in revenge for “all the humiliations that China suffered during the Arrow War, not the least was the looting and destruction of the Yuan Ming Yuan by the Allies.”<sup>162</sup> He was however, not the only one to hold such views as Conger, Haldane, and several others also came to similar conclusions, but detailed analysis of their views will be saved for Chapters Two and Three.

Sergeant was another person who sympathized with the Empress and her role in the Boxer conflict. He argued that when “the Manchus unanimously called for war to the knife, [Cixi only] approved of their advice” as a means “to preserve the Empire” from the “oppression of China by the foreigners.” As he explained, with the many defeats suffered at the hands of foreign powers since the First Opium War, Cixi “ascertained that there was no hope of China finding any protector from without to save her from the encroachments of the greedy Western nations, that she must rely solely on her own resources” for defence. Unfortunately, all that was available were the Boxers, who, although completely untested in combat, had garnered Her Majesty’s support with the hope that they were “men ready to promise everything [ranging from] the sweeping away of the intruders into the sea whence they came, [to] the restoration of the old glories of the Celestial Empire.” Basically, without any military allies, the Qing Empire had no choice but to rely on the fanatical militias for resistance against imperial aggression from foreign powers.<sup>163</sup>

Also among those sympathetic to Cixi is Carl, who explains that “the Boxer movement [...] started among the people, the humble people, in the Northern provinces of China, far from the Capital, and had been in existence for a number of years before the

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<sup>162</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 119, 123.

<sup>163</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 206, 207, 235-236.

attack upon the Legations in 1900.” Carl sees the movement as developing out of the growing anti-foreign sentiment throughout the Empire. Eventually, it gained so much momentum that even “the Emperor and Empress Dowager, powerful and autocratic as they are, could not stem the current,” and war eventually broke out. Therefore, she concludes that it is wrong to believe that “Her Majesty was [...] responsible for [...] aiding and abetting the Boxers [and] was considered to be the high priestess, if not the originator of the order.”<sup>164</sup> In other words, it was the general populace, not the monarchs, who were responsible for the outbreak of violence.

Then there are those who claimed that the Boxer conflict was actually started by the foreign powers, and thus neither Cixi nor her subjects should be blamed for it. As Latourette argued, “the Boxer explosion was the outcome of the pressure of an aggressive Occident upon a conservative China, plus a strenuous popular resistance to that pressure.” This eventually resulted in the formation of the

‘Boxers’ [who were] violently antiforeign [and] practiced magical arts which they maintained rendered them impervious to the bullets of the aliens. [Believing this,] the Boxers attacked foreigners and the Chinese converts of Christian missionaries. The Powers, alarmed, began to take armed action to defend their citizens. This aggravated the disorder and led the Empress Dowager to retaliation. As a result the imperial government, headed by Tz’ü Hsi, virtually declared war against the world [but only because] the Old Buddha was [...] more than half convinced that with their magical powers they could get rid of the hated ‘barbarians.’<sup>165</sup>

According to this view, Her Majesty’s decision to employ military force was to defend against, rather than to attack, the Westerners, making it an act of resistance, and not aggression.

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<sup>164</sup> Carl, *With the Empress Dowager*, 263, 264, 265.

<sup>165</sup> Latourette, “Introduction,” vii, xi-xii.

Also agreeing with Latourette, is Collis who explained that although Cixi was the one who said “We declare for war” against the foreign powers, it was only because she was aware that “war has already been started by them,” as the “fortifications in Ta-ku have been taken by the Barbarians and news has just come in that they are demanding the seizure of [China’s] revenues, [and] the control of [China’s] army.” Facing this reality, this was the only course of action she could take, even if she received advice from Guangxu “that [this] may plunge the country into a hopeless conflict [as] the Allied European na-nations are ten ... a hundred ... a thou-thousand times stronger than Jap-ap-Japan” and the Qing Empire, since “to fight and lose is at least better than to sit waiting to lose!”<sup>166</sup> From this perspective, it seems that the Empress really had no choice but to take up arms against the Western powers, but is this a correct assumption? Considering that this belief conflicts with so many other accounts, this is a very difficult, if not impossible, question to answer.

So who was responsible for instigating the Boxer Conflict? Based on the analysis thus far, it seems that the answer to this question cannot be determined by solely looking at the early literature on Cixi, which provide a vast array of conflicting explanations. The problem however, is that the more recent publications, as will be shown in the following chapter, contain just as many contradictions, and therefore, does little towards putting an end to this discussion.

It is clear that early writers of Cixi have not been able to generate one consistent image of her. This is not to say that early literature should be discounted as useless, as it does offer valuable knowledge if the authors had close relations with Cixi and held an

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<sup>166</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 156, 157, 159, 160.

unbiased view of her. But it still needs to be taken with extreme caution because, for every truthful fact presented by one individual, comes a barrage of doubtful information by others, making it impossible to determine just what is actually correct. With this in mind, it is now time to examine the work of recent researchers to see if they have been successful in sorting out the many contradicting narratives and arguments that have just been discussed.

## **Chapter Two: The Re-evaluation of Cixi in Recent Western Publications**

The books on Cixi dealt with in this study that were recently published, tend to have proper citations and are more academically inclined than those reviewed in the previous Chapter, with the exception of Charlotte Haldane's biography entitled *The Last Great Empress of China*, which only contains some brief notes and an informal bibliography.<sup>167</sup> In this sense then, recent research on Cixi can be taken as a scholarly response to the many questions and controversies presented in the earlier literature about her.

In addition to Haldane, writers from this era that will be discussed include Marina Warner, with her book, *Dragon Empress: Life and Times of Tz'u-Hsi 1835-1908*; and Grant Hayter-Menzies with his book, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger: The Uncommon Friendship of Two Women and Two Worlds*. This category of recent books also includes *The Last Empress: The She-Dragon of China*, written by the anthropologist, Keith Laidler, and *Dragon Lady: The Life and Legend of the Last Empress of China*, which is the work of journalist Sterling Seagrave who has already been introduced on numerous occasions throughout this study. Along with the fact that they all published after 1949, these authors have also been grouped together here because, for the most part, their work can be categorized as scholarly research, since they carefully documented their sources and in most instances, provided clear citations as well, but does this necessarily mean that their literature is more accurate than the material from earlier on? Before moving on to

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<sup>167</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 277-291.

the forthcoming discussion, which will answer this question, it is worth noting that none of the individuals mentioned in this paragraph have ever claimed to possess the ability to read, write, or speak Chinese, meaning that were in many ways prevented from fully accessing non-Western sources of information on the Empress. In addition to the aforementioned books in Western languages, some recent general historical studies of China will be included below because they have important sections on Cixi. But because so many Western scholars have written about Cixi, it is only possible to include a very small number of their works, and simply those that are directly relevant to the subject matter at hand. In particular, the analysis of this chapter will center on the publications of Haldane (1965), Warner (1993), Seagrave (1993), Laidler (2003), and Hayter-Menzies (2011), focusing specifically on how these newer “academic” publications added controversies to the historical narrative of Cixi that began in the earlier literature.

Susan Peck MacDonald argues that “it is problem-solving activity that generates all academic writing” since “the subject of academic writing either already is or is [...] turned into a *problem* before the writer proceeds.”<sup>168</sup> In the case of this study, the issue at hand is that early Western authors have often misunderstood Cixi, which is demonstrated by the many contradicting claims they have made about her. The more recent Western scholars featured in this chapter have all attempted to solve this problem through their detailed research, but have they succeeded? My research indicates that they have not, as their historical narratives are just as varied and controversial as those found in the earlier literature of the West.

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<sup>168</sup> Susan Peck MacDonald, “Problem Definition in Academic Writing,” *College English* 49:3 (March 1987): 315-331. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/377930> (accessed March 18, 2013), 316.

### *Recent Literature on Cixi's Early Life*

The previous chapter demonstrated that early Western authors had very diverse views about Cixi's birth date, birth place, and other basic facts in her early life, such that even back in 1911, Sergeant was forced to admit that "it is disappointing [...] that we should know so little of the first chapter in the life of China's greatest Empress." This however, just like with his fellow writers at the time, did not stop him from adding to the already confusing list of conflicting explanations by making his own assertions, as he claimed that she "was born early in the second half of the year 1835, in that section of Peking which is known to Europeans as the Tartar city [and] her father was a Manchu military officer of the name of Hweicheng."<sup>169</sup> The question now of course, is whether the recent authors have fared any better in sorting out this issue, and it appears that they have not.

Disagreeing with Sergeant, Haldane claimed that Cixi "was not even born in Peking, but in the province of Anhui."<sup>170</sup> Similarly, Warner suggested that the Empress was born somewhere other than the Qing capital by indicating that "it is not known when she first arrived in Peking."<sup>171</sup> Laidler also agreed with this, stating that Cixi "was born into relative poverty in the southern province of Anhui."<sup>172</sup> In contrast, Song Ruizhi reaffirmed that "she was born in Beijing," prompting once again, the need to ask, which of these writers are correct?<sup>173</sup> The Empress could only have one place of birth, so where

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<sup>169</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager of China*, 1, 5.

<sup>170</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 17.

<sup>171</sup> Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 3.

<sup>172</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 25.

<sup>173</sup> Song, "Cixi," 351.

was it? Unfortunately, that cannot be determined based upon the knowledge currently available.

Moreover, the recent Western writers seem just as confused and uncertain about the identity of Cixi's father as were the earlier writers. For instance, Laidler argues that "[Cixi's] father was Captain Hui Cheng, a Manchu officer in the Blue Bordered Banner Regiment,"<sup>174</sup> while Hayter-Menzies claims that "we now know that [...] her father [was] Kueixiang."<sup>175</sup> This discrepancy resembled the differences within the earlier literature. This suggests that scholarly research has not managed to sort out some of the controversies surrounding Cixi and her background that were noted in Chapter One. Thus, it seems the only thing about her early life that seems certain, as Seagrave explained, is that "she was born [...] somewhere in China, but exactly where we do not know [...] nor are we sure of her father's name or occupation."<sup>176</sup> This general fuzziness in the knowledge on Cixi shared amongst the recent writers is not only restricted to their understanding of her childhood and adolescence, but extends to her adult life as well.

The most critical moment of Cixi's life was when she gave birth to Xianfeng's only son, which effectively enabled her to become an empress. As Sergeant so vividly describe back in 1911, "when Yehonala presented her lord with [an heir,] all possible honours were heaped upon her, [and] the former concubine Yehonala received the name of Empress of the Western Palace" in a few years.<sup>177</sup> Not all of the recent writers, however, would agree with this claim.

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<sup>174</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 25.

<sup>175</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 20.

<sup>176</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 18.

<sup>177</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 24.

Like Maurice Collis' account that was discussed in Chapter One, Keith Laidler's book in 2003 suggests a similar theory of Tongzhi's parentage. He follows

[A] story [which] claims that Yehonala's son was not her son at all. The child had been purchased secretly from Chinese peasants and smuggled into the Forbidden City at the time of Yehonala's confinement. She subsequently passed the infant off as her own and the offspring of the Emperor.<sup>178</sup>

While "the risks [of doing this] were undoubtedly enormous, [as] she was gambling with her life and facing a certain, hideous death were she to be discovered,"

Laidler explains that "she was prepared to chance it" because,

While [...] several of the [Xianfeng] Emperor's ancestors had sired male heirs by the time they were fifteen years old, Hsien Feng, now in his mid-twenties, had still not produced the longed-for son that would guarantee his tottering Dynasty some measure of stability. Were Yehonala to present the Emperor with a son, her position in court would be assured, unassailable.<sup>179</sup>

Therefore, knowing that her husband was desperate for a child, "if Yehonala [could] pass off another couple's child as the Emperor's son she knew that the doors to power and wealth would fly open." By doing so she came to rule China for almost half a century afterwards.<sup>180</sup> If all of this is true, as Laidler contends, it seems that Cixi's ambitions had no limits, as she would do virtually anything, including faking her own pregnancy, in order to achieve her goals, and that Collis was correct when he stated that "since she gambled for the highest stakes, she had no reservations, no deed being too

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<sup>178</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 139.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 139.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 139

stark, were it necessary for success.”<sup>181</sup> This account however, reads more like a fairy-tale than a serious historical explanation.

It is puzzling that Laidler would even use this story to explain Tongzhi’s parentage, since similar claims, such as Collis’ account, has already been heavily challenged and discounted on numerous occasions by a number of researchers writing before him, including Harry Hussey, as well as several others that will be looked at now.<sup>182</sup> To begin, this story would make sense only if Xianfeng was completely incapable of siring children himself, which was apparently not the case. Although “some chroniclers would have the baby smuggled in or substituted, or fathered by someone else,” as Warner argues, this probably did not happen considering that “Hsien-Feng, though not conspicuously virile, was not sterile: he already had his [one] year-old daughter, the Princess Jung-an, by one of his concubines, who later [...] also bore him a son who died in infancy.”<sup>183</sup> Jung Chang also agreed with this, stating that Xianfeng did indeed have a “second son, born two years later to [a] concubine, [but] lived only a few hours and died before he was given a name.”<sup>184</sup> Perhaps even more telling is Seagrave’s assertion that “the Manchu were so paranoid about succession to the throne that a substitution would have been all but impossible, and Yehenara’s pregnancy would have been monitored as closely as if she were the wife of the Prince of Wales.” Therefore, the theory that “Yehenara did not give birth but bought a male baby from a Chinese woman and passed the child off as her own and Hsien Feng’s” must be false.<sup>185</sup> Why then, would

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<sup>181</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 7.

<sup>182</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 89, 97.

<sup>183</sup> Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 30.

<sup>184</sup> Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 18.

<sup>185</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 24.

such a fairy-tale be cited in a scholarly text by an author writing in the twenty-first century?

The answer to why Laidler would base his argument on such a story can perhaps be found in his explanation for Tongzhi's death. He claims, just as the aforementioned Harry Hussey did, that this tragedy occurred because of Cixi's push for power, leading her to dispose of the boy ruler, who was "apparently" not her real son. "Yehonala seemed intent on orchestrating the early death of her son," which, as alluded to before, is not difficult to understand since

Her authority was, and remained, entirely dependent upon her position as the mother of Tung Chih. But when, in the fullness of time, Tung Chih's future wife in turn gave birth to a son, everything would change. The Emperor's wife would now be entitled to the honorific 'Empress Mother'. A single act of parturition would sweep away much of Yehonala's status and power. Worse might follow. For if the Emperor himself was to predecease his wife, Yehonala would lose even the title of Empress Dowager in favour of the late Emperor's spouse and with it the remainder of her influence. She would remain an Empress Dowager of a senior generation, theoretically of higher status, but she would not be *the* Empress Dowager [original emphasis].

Therefore, "the solution was simple – Tung Chih must have no sons," meaning that "he must die young," and for this reason, "from a very early age, his mother allowed his eunuch to introduce him to a whole series of decadent 'pastimes' [...] in brothels and dancing houses [and soon] the Emperor contracted a venereal disease, perhaps even syphilis." This disease, combined with a smallpox infection, brought an end to his short life.<sup>186</sup> Basically, the Empress willingly sacrificed the child's health for the sake of power, which would already be an act of sheer evil, but Laidler gives us more.

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<sup>186</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 136-138, 139, 140, 141.

On top of this, Laidler also argued that the young emperor's mother had him exposed to smallpox by a tainted washcloth, which served the same purpose as that of a paper napkin, while having dinner. As the explanation goes, during meals,

Hot towels are given to each diner, with which they can refresh themselves by wiping their face, and then their hands. [...] In the case of Tung Chih, it was alleged that the towel marked for the Emperor had first been rubbed over the open, active pustules of a smallpox victim, and the proffered to the Celestial Prince. As the Son of Heaven would never perform such a menial task himself, it was left to one of the eunuch attendants, under the supervision of Yehonala's confidant, the Grand Eunuch, Li Lien-ying, to diligently wipe the Emperor's face with the virus-permeated cloth, so ensuring his infection.<sup>187</sup>

While this story paints a far more negative image of Cixi than most of the others discussed so far, it is not entirely new as it was mentioned a few decades earlier by Haldane. As she explained,

Table-napkins were not used in China; instead, small square towels sterilized in steam were passed to diners [during a meal], who, between each course, wiped their faces as well as their lips with them. This was an agreeable and normally more hygienic practice than the use of a dry table-napkin. But it could be and on certain authenticated occasions was, turned to a deadly purpose. If the hot, steaming little towel were first rubbed on the faces of a smallpox sufferer, covered in highly infectious running pustules, and then passed over the features of an intended victim...? A master, and above all the Son of Heaven, would never himself wipe his face. This menial task would be performed by a reverentially attendant eunuch under the supervision of the Chief Eunuch in person. It might be a simple and devilishly effect method of assassination.<sup>188</sup>

The implications of this story are clear: Cixi murdered her own flesh and blood to remain in power, but is it true?

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<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>188</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 83.

Just like all the other claims discussed thus far, the aforementioned story is not supported by any solid evidence, and therefore it could be another slanderous piece fabricated to depict Cixi as a cold hearted power hungry murderer. Even Haldane has to admit that “whether or not Tung Chih was thus disposed of [in this way] will never be known,” so why would Laidler take such a story seriously?<sup>189</sup> By looking at his references, it does not appear that he has any evidence to verify its accuracy, yet he treats this explanation almost as if it is the uncontested truth, but why? The reason is that this theory plays an important role in his claim that Tongzhi was not actually parented by Xianfeng or Cixi.

This story of how the young Emperor, due to his mother’s actions, contracted syphilis and then smallpox is used by Laidler to portray Cixi as an evil woman who, in an effort to remain as ruler, relentlessly tried to kill her son. He takes this cold hearted murder as proof that Tongzhi was not actually her own flesh and blood: “even though it means their own demise, most parents have no wish to outlive their offspring, and will happily lay down their lives to ensure the survival of the next generation.” Therefore the fact that Tongzhi was murdered therefore suggests that he was just “the child of Chinese peasants [who was] simply a tool to achieve power” used by the evil Cixi, and as such, he was “regarded [by her] as little better than an animal.”<sup>190</sup> Warner, however, found this theory difficult to believe since it would have required faking the birth of a royal heir within the imperial harem. Thus, she concludes that “the charge that Tz’u-hsi deliberately

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 138, 139.

corrupted her son [...] and rejoiced in his death is unconvincing.”<sup>191</sup> If so, how exactly did he die?

That the young Emperor died of smallpox seems to be agreed upon by most academic authors in the West, but the question is how did he get infected with it? As Seagrave explains, “he was [...] stricken by smallpox, presumably contracted somewhere outside the Forbidden City.” Seagrave observes that “by the time he was fourteen, Tung Chih [...] was known to be slipping out of the Forbidden City to find forbidden fruit in the wine bistros, theaters, and brothels of the Tartar and Chinese cities.” The key here is that this behavior was solely his own choice and had nothing to do with Cixi, who “was irrationally convinced that Tung Chih was just going through a rebellious adolescence.” According to Seagrave, “his behavior around [Cixi] was exemplary, so [she was] deceived,” resulting in the lack of action on her part to end his debauchery.<sup>192</sup>

This explanation is however, not accepted by everyone and Laidler provides a strong counter-argument against it. As he asserts, “it is inconceivable that she did not know of the shameful exploits of her son, and the fatal consequences of such adventures,” because “Yehonala’s intelligence network was the most efficient in the Middle Kingdom.” As Empress, “it was within her power to forbid these revels [but] she did nothing to prevent them.”<sup>193</sup> Laidler interprets Cixi’s inaction to have been intentional and not accounted for by naiveté. This is a point that historian Conrad Schirokauer seems to agree with, as he states that “she dominated her son and, it is rumored, encouraged him in the debaucheries that weakened his constitution and brought him to the grave at the

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<sup>191</sup> Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 107.

<sup>192</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 125, 126, 133, 135.

<sup>193</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 138.

youthful age of nineteen.”<sup>194</sup> Even if these allegations are correct however, they at best only provide a weak reason to question Tongzhi’s parentage by suggesting that his mother had treated him poorly, and certainly do not in any way prove that she had murdered him.

As Seagrave argued, it “is highly unlikely” that “she had poisoned her own son with the smallpox hankie in order to regain the throne for herself [...] because she had borne an heir to the throne [and thus] already enjoyed absolute prestige.” In his view, she had nothing to gain from slaying her child since “empress dowager was as good as it got.” That is, it would actually have been more beneficial for her to have kept him alive, but this is not a point with which everyone would necessarily agree upon.<sup>195</sup>

Laidler of course, as already mentioned previously, disagrees with this, arguing that Cixi, in order to remain as the ruling authority, “could not allow a grandchild to be born” since “a grandchild could threaten [...] her power.” This therefore meant that “Tung Chih must die intestate,” or in this specific case, prior to having offspring of his own. The only way to ensure this was to kill him before he had the chance to become a father.<sup>196</sup>

In short, there are two contradictory arguments about Tongzhi’s death. These two arguments have been in circulation since the early twentieth century, which is remarkable, considering how long they have persisted in Western scholarship. Furthermore, the works of Seagrave and Laidler are published quite recently, and are separated by just a mere decade, with the former publishing his book in 1993, and the latter following in 2003, demonstrating that the Western knowledge of Cixi is still far

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<sup>194</sup> Conrad Schirokauer, *Modern China and Japan: A Brief History* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1982), 148.

<sup>195</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 138.

<sup>196</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 137.

from complete. This is not to mention that the differences in their interpretations become even more visible when examining explanations for how Alute died.

The debate within popular literature regarding Alute's death, as discussed in Chapter One, has been carried over into recent Western literature as well. So the question remains: how did Tongzhi's wife die? While "there is no precise evidence about how this [...] tragedy occurred," Haldane suggests that she was murdered by her mother-in-law, and the motive is quite simple:

If A-lu-te produced an heir to the Throne, she herself would become Empress Dowager in the event of Tung Chih's death. For Yehonala the outlook was an increasingly grim one, especially when it became known that the Empress Consort was pregnant. Only if by some strange coincidence the [...] young Empress were to die before the birth of [the] heir would it be possible for [Cixi's] regency to be resumed, a highly unlikely contingency unless fate might be assisted in bringing it about.

With this in mind, Haldane rhetorically asks, "what, from the Empress's point of view, could have been more desirable than the death of the foetus, which could not unfortunately, be brought about without his mother's demise, whether by her own pathetic hand or by adroitly administered poison [...]?"<sup>197</sup> The answer: absolutely nothing. If this theory is correct, then Cixi's greatest desire at the time was to dispose of her daughter-in-law and unborn grandchild, and according to the implications shown here, she succeeded in doing so.

In line with Haldane's claim, Laidler agrees with the theory that Cixi "had ordered A-lu-te's murder" because "A-lu-te was said to be pregnant with the dead Emperor's child [and] if it was a son, it would be Emperor, [and] A-lu-te would become Empress Mother." If this were to happen, it would seriously affect "Yehonala [who]

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<sup>197</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 82, 91, 92,

achieved her pre-eminent status [...] solely by being the mother of the heir,” which would be lost if she became grandmother. In contrast, the birth of “a granddaughter would have been no threat to Yehonala.” Thus, “Yehonala confined A-lu-te until she had given birth, and that once the sex of the infant was confirmed as male, she knew that the continued existence of her grandson and his mother would jeopardise her power.” This led her to take the necessary actions to protect her authority, which meant she had to have her daughter-in law and child killed.<sup>198</sup> This explanation, however, is contradicted by the work of several other scholars.

Laidler’s argument rests heavily on the fact that Tongzhi’s widow was expecting a child, a point with which Warner disagrees. She believes that “if Alute had been pregnant,” she could not have been harmed as “one party or another would have adopted her cause, and her unborn baby and heir” to ensure that they were fully protected, even from Cixi.<sup>199</sup> In other words, according to her view, the Empress could never have killed her daughter-in-law because the only motive to dispose of her was if she was pregnant, yet if she was, she would have been so well guarded that it would have been impossible for anyone to murder her.

Seagrave takes this argument a step further, and asserts that even if Tongzhi’s widow had been pregnant, Cixi would still have no reason to murder her. As he sees the situation, “it was Tzu Hsi who chose A-lu-te as her son’s empress [and] if she had a son the boy would be Tzu Hsi’s grandson, and his birth would reconfirm her status at court and give her security for another generation.” Thus the Empress Dowager would only gain from becoming a grandmother and therefore would have had absolutely no motive to

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<sup>198</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 136, 137, 143, 149, 150.

<sup>199</sup> Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 111.

kill her daughter-in-law. In his view, this is probably why “no evidence has come to light that she mistreated A-lu-te in any way.”<sup>200</sup> While this explanation certainly cast doubt on the claims made by Lailder, it still fails to explain how or why Alute died.

Indeed the explanation for how Alute died might well forever remain unknown. Considering the many explanations currently circulating in the literature, it seems that the death of Tongzhi and his widow are just as mysterious today as it was in the past. Did Cixi have a hand in killing both of them? Or did they perish for other reasons? These questions remain unanswered by the Western scholars discussed in this thesis.

### ***Recent Literature on Cixi's Later Life***

Following the death of Tongzhi and his wife, Cixi returned to power and ruled China until her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor was able to assume control for himself in 1889. He was an ambitious young man and within ten years after gaining power, made an attempt to modernize his Empire by instigating a series of changes that culminated in what has since been known as the Hundred Days of Reform. Unfortunately, his efforts failed, but for what reason? By looking at literature discussed in the previous chapter, no definite answer to this question can be found. Some of those sources claimed that Guangxu's ingenious plans for reforms were ended when he was imprisoned by his conservative minded aunt, while others argue that he grudgingly, albeit still willingly, agreed to put his ideas to rest after realizing that they were impractical and would never

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<sup>200</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 143.

be met with success. Could the work of later authors, however, do anything to clear up this debate?

Considering their differing opinions regarding Tongzhi and Alute's respective deaths, it is note-worthy that Seagrave and Laidler provide mutually contradictory accounts about how Guangxu was treated by his aunt. Laidler claims that Cixi had "her nephew overthrown and safely locked away" in "the Ocean Terrace, under the strictest scrutiny [where] his every action, his every word, [were] noted and reported to her." This was, in Laidler's eyes, because she apparently saw that his reformist attitude "had abandoned all the cultural traditions of filial piety which, or so the conservatives believed, set China apart from the barbarians." She was also angered at the fact that he "betrayed her and her followers" by plotting to have Yuan Shikai's troops surround her palace, trying to render her unable to interfere with his vision for change in the Empire. Therefore, Laidler's conclusion is that the drive for modernization was ended when the highly conservative minded Cixi "savagely imprisoned her nephew for 'studying [and promoting] the interests of his country' when those interests conflicted with her own."<sup>201</sup>

Laidler, as usual, is not alone in making this claim, as other authors who preceded him have also come to, more or less, the same conclusion. Haldane, for instance, stated that once Cixi found out about "the Emperor's daring [and] hastily conceived plot," which was "to [have] Yuan Shi-kai [...] prevent her leaving the Summer Palace before he could make his [reform] Decrees operative," she had "the Emperor placed under close arrest and taken by four eunuchs on Li Lien-ying's staff to Ying Tai, the Ocean Terrace, where in semi-darkness and total misery he was to expiate his guilt during the following

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<sup>201</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 198, 199, 200, 264.

two years.”<sup>202</sup> Similarly, Fang Chao-ying stated that “on September 22, the [Empress] summoned the Emperor to her presence and ordered him placed in confinement” immediately after “Yüan Shih-k'ai [...] betrayed [the Emperor] by revealing the plans to the Empress Dowager.”<sup>203</sup> Warner also described that after Guangxu's plans to have his aunt's palace surrounded by Yuan's troops failed, on the “morning of 22 September 1898 over the lotus-covered lakes of the Sea Palaces [...] the young emperor of China was hustled into the prison where he would [spend] the following years,” being left to watch as “Tz'u-hsi enumerated each of his reforms and abolished them.”<sup>204</sup> The important point to take away from this is that all of these authors seem to be in agreement that the Empress was responsible for ending the Hundred Days of Reform and China's hope at modernization when she placed her nephew into confinement, which is significant considering the numerous opinions that earlier writers had on this issue.

Furthermore, to support their claims, most of these authors also gave vivid details outlining the appalling conditions that the Emperor was forced to endure while in confinement. Haldane wrote that

The setting was idyllic, surrounded by rippling waters and glossy foliage. But his dwelling, barred and bolted to prevent any attempt at escape, consisted of four small rooms, cold, draughty, and furnished hardly better than cells; his bed was a rough one, and his food the kind thrown to coolies, which even the lesser eunuchs would have disdained.<sup>205</sup>

A very similar description was also provided by Warner, who explained that even several years after his initial arrest and imprisonment, “Kuang-hsu's apartments at the

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<sup>202</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 139, 147.

<sup>203</sup> Fang, “Hsiao-ch'in,” 298.

<sup>204</sup> Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 169.

<sup>205</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 147.

summer palace [still] had bricked-in windows and doors, so that he could neither see over the lake, nor leave freely except through one exit left open.” This is not to mention that “Kuang-hsu was [being] tormented by neglectful and insolent eunuchs; when he complained that his food was stale and unpalatable, nothing was done; [and] when electric light was installed in 1903, his apartments alone were omitted.”<sup>206</sup> Following this line of thought, Laidler reaffirmed that

After the coup of 1898, her nephew had been held in the Ocean Terrace, the picturesque, island-bound nest of red-lacquered pavilions, halls and marble walkways, set in the South Sea, which Yehonala had herself embellished. In her first flush of anger at Kuang Hsu’s attempted ‘coup’ she had ordered new ‘improvements’: many of the windows looking out over splendid views were bricked up, others were left open to the elements. The Emperor, already suffering from a variety of ailments, was kept half-starved and isolated, his quarters unswept, vermin-ridden and insufficiently heated.<sup>207</sup>

Based on these accounts, it appears that Guangxu was not just detained, but was actually heavily abused by his aunt. It must however, be noted that not everyone agreed with this theory.

Although this conclusion that the Emperor, after his ill-fated attempt to modernize China, was “living a virtual prisoner in the palace until he died,” is accepted by several authors, it is not supported by everyone. Seagrave, for instance, calls it a “story that was invented [...] as a means to discredit the empress dowager.” He believes that Guangxu surrendered certain governing powers to his aunt after the Hundred Days of Reform is undeniable, but it was completely his own choice. Realising that his ideas for change were in fact flawed and unsuitable for China,

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<sup>206</sup> Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 217, 223.

<sup>207</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 213.

Kuang Hsu [...] fell into a deep despair. He went into seclusion in the Ying-tai pavilion on an island in the lake called the South Sea next to the Forbidden City. His disappearance from the court for the next three days, while he regained his composure, caused the legations to believe rumors that the emperor had been deposed and [...] that Tsu Hsi had imprisoned, tortured, and killed her nephew for having dared to think of reforming the government. [But] of course, the emperor was neither dead nor imprisoned and had been back at work [soon after].<sup>208</sup>

In other words, Seagrave argues that many scholars have mistakenly thought that the young ruler was arrested and forced into confinement by his aunt when in fact he was the one who actually chose to be left alone in order to have a moment away from his governing duties to clear his mind and review his thoughts.

Seagrave further argues that Guangxu's choice to isolate himself on the Ocean Terrace of the Sea Palace was not significant, since "the Ying-tai pavilion was the office he had always shared with Tzu Hsi when they worked together." This is evident in the fact that he was again "working with his aunt in the Ying-tai pavilion" the second he "had pulled himself together [...] and resumed his customary reading and making notations on memorials from officials." The only difference now was that "he had [...] to function once again as he had for years, under his aunt's supervision," "passing the more sensitive decisions on to her." For Seagrave, this was "unfortunate and sad, to be sure, but hardly sinister," as he desperately required her help to correct the many mistakes he had just made by trying to rush the reformation of China.<sup>209</sup> Simply put, in Seagrave's reading, Cixi only returned to power because she was needed at court to guide her nephew back to success, and not because she forcefully imprisoned him to seize control.

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<sup>208</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 160, 235.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 235, 236.

Which of these arguments is correct? Was Guangxu imprisoned or not? Did he voluntarily step down from power or was he forced off his throne? Unfortunately, these questions remain unanswerable for these Western scholars, and that was why Hayter-Menzies tries to bring both perspectives together. As he argues, because “Cixi had been restrained by advisors and by foreign diplomatic pressure from dethroning him [Guangxu] entirely,” she never actually imprisoned her nephew, but had still, albeit through less direct means, managed “the demotion of Guangxu” to a lesser position in the Imperial Court.<sup>210</sup> This explanation, however, does little to end this debate. Perhaps the only point to take away from this discussion is that recent academic writing in the West fares no better than the early twentieth-century literature when it comes to determining what happened to the Emperor after the Hundred Days of Reform.

Regardless of whether the Guangxu Emperor willingly stepped down or was forcefully removed from power, it seems certain to Katharine Carl that “the Empress Dowager [...] crushed the Reformers, and reseated herself upon the Throne, [and thus] when [...] the secret society of Boxers began their sanguinary attacks upon the foreigners,” some “two years after the ‘coup d’état,’ [...] Her Majesty was considered responsible for them.” But should she have been held responsible for this?<sup>211</sup> Who should be blamed for causing the fiasco of 1900? This question has been the subject of much debate amongst many early authors of popular literature, and unsurprisingly, it has been continued within the realm of recent writing as well.

Out of all the recent authors, Laidler is perhaps the one most critical of Cixi and her role in the Boxer Incident. He portrays her as the one responsible for instigating the

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<sup>210</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 96.

<sup>211</sup> Carl, *With the Empress Dowager*, 263.

violence that caused the innocent foreigners a great deal of grief and suffering. In his view, it all started “on 21st June [1900 when] Yehonala issued an Imperial edict declaring war on an astonishing nine of the most powerful countries on the globe: Great Britain, France, the United States of America, Germany, Japan, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Belgium and Holland.” Following that, he tells us that “the Boxers were formally organised as adjuncts to the government troops” and were ordered to attack the “small [...] number of ill-armed foreigners,” even though “the diplomats in Beijing posed no threat at all to China.”<sup>212</sup> In other words, at the time, the Western embassies were totally defenceless, and therefore Cixi’s decision to lay siege upon them was an act of unnecessary aggression.

The belief that Cixi was the aggressor responsible for instigating the Boxer Incident is of course, not held by Laidler alone. Warner similarly states that “on 21 June 1900, the Empress Dowager Tz’u-hsi decreed, in the name of the Emperor Kuang-hsu, that China was at war with Great Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Holland and Japan,” but this was really just an act of formality as “the Chinese army [had already] fired the first volleys of siege of the legations” a few days before. Furthermore, this is not to mention that “a mixed international force of two thousand-odd soldiers under the British admiral Seymour” had also been “attacked by Boxers [even earlier] on 13 June,” suggesting that the conflict was undoubtedly started by Her Majesty.<sup>213</sup>

Also ascribing to this view is the political scientist Harry G. Gelber, who explained that

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<sup>212</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 226.

<sup>213</sup> Warner, *The Dragon Empress*, 189, 190, 193.

By May 1900 the Boxers advanced towards Beijing, seized railway lines, expelled foreign workers and burned down churches. By mid-June they broke into Tianjin and Beijing and started looting and killing Christians, often with great cruelty. [This] was not just allowed but encouraged by the empress [and] on June 19 Cixi [finally] published a declaration of war against the powers.<sup>214</sup>

Although Warner and Laidler gave a different date for when the war officially began, all three authors seem certain that the Empress was the one who started it, but many disagreed with this opinion, and were instead convinced that the Western nations, through their aggressive behaviour, had actually instigated this conflict.

Unlike the three aforementioned authors, Haldane believed that Westerners, through their aggressive imperialistic behaviour over the years, had instigated the Boxer Conflict. As she explained, “the Battle for the Concessions, waged against one another by the Great Powers for Chinese territory—on Chinese soil and in complete disregard of the interests of those helpless people to whom that territory belonged,” had gone on for far too long and “the time had come to call a halt to such cynical aggression.” In result, “On 13 June 1900, the wolves of China, at last unleashed by the Motherly and Auspicious Empress Dowager, descended on their enemies and launched their vicious attack on the Legations of Peking, determined to wipe them out.”<sup>215</sup> Based on this perspective, it seems that Cixi should not be held responsible for causing the war.

Going along with this perspective, Historian Frederic Wakeman, Jr., noted that although “the empress dowager [had] formally declared war against the powers,” she did this only after “news reached the court that the Allies had seized the Taku forts,” making

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<sup>214</sup> Harry G. Gelber, *The Dragon and the Foreign Devils: China and the World, 1100 BC to the Present* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007), 233.

<sup>215</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 182.

it an act of defence, and not aggression. He believed that the invasion of Qing territory convinced her “that the Great Powers intended in the future to turn China into a military and financial protectorate,” which frightened her so much that she had “the 200,000 Boxers [...] enrolled in the imperial army,” even though “she could not believe entirely in the Boxer’s magic powers.” However, since “conventional weapons had already failed to defend her realm [he asks,] what else did she have to fall back on but the hearts and minds of her subjects?” In other words, according to this account, under the threatening circumstances at the time, Cixi had no choice but to rely on the fanatical militias for resistance against imperial aggression from the West.<sup>216</sup>

Seagrave also believed that Cixi played no role in starting the Boxer Incident, but went further to argue that she never actually declared war on the foreign powers either. According to him, all she did was publish “an edict acknowledging that hostilities had commenced and that a de facto state of war existed between China and the Allies.” Again however, this was only after the fact “that the Allies [and] their forces had approached the Taku Forts in a threatening manner, and shooting had begun.” From this perspective, it was the aggressive behavior of Westerner leaders, and not what Cixi did, that instigated the conflict.<sup>217</sup>

A similar point was made a couple of decades later, by Hayter-Menzies, who noted that at the turn of the century, “China was, in all respects, completely alone” in facing the threats of European “nations that had always made demands on China,” since “nothing came of [the] effort” to establish “an offensive/defensive alliance with Japan, [...] because Japan itself had an eye on China.” As he continues, “this isolation may

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<sup>216</sup> Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *The Fall of Imperial China* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1975), 219-220.

<sup>217</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 288, 332.

explain why the dowager turned to home-grown forces to keep China for the Chinese [because] she had nothing else” to turn to.<sup>218</sup> In this sense, although aggressive, Cixi’s use of the Boxers was really just a last ditch effort to defend her Empire from Western imperialism.

Thus, according to the four authors just discussed, Western aggression had forced Cixi to take up arms against her will. That she resented going to war was made clear when she announced that

The foreigners have decided to declare war against China. I understand that we are not as strong as they are. The country is to perish no matter whether we fight or not. If we do not fight and perish, we will be shamed before our ancestors. So we must do our utmost [to defend].<sup>219</sup>

Left with no other option than to engage in open conflict, Wakeman explained that although she was “uncertain that China could win such a conflict, she felt that her dynasty, and the country, should at least go down fighting,” instead of waiting to be taken over.<sup>220</sup> If all of this is correct, then the Empress should not be blamed for instigating the Boxer Conflict, but whether this is an accurate understanding of what happened is difficult to determine, since it is contradicted by the accounts given by Warner, Gelber, and Laidler.

Just to complicate things even further, another perspective is provided by historians William J. Duiker and Bessma Momani, who explained that “the Boxer Rebellion was an uprising in 1900 led by a secret society in China.” It was “provoked by a damaging drought and high levels of unemployment caused in part by foreign economic

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<sup>218</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 91, 92.

<sup>219</sup> Cixi as quoted in Wu Yung, *The Flight of an Empress*, trans. Ida Pruitt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1936), 143.

<sup>220</sup> Wakeman, *The Fall of Imperial China*, 220.

activity.” As a result, “the Boxers attacked foreign interests [but] were soon defeated by Western powers.”<sup>221</sup> The significant thing here is that the two historians never once mention Cixi’s connection to the whole conflict. This suggests that they are either confused by the numerous arguments about her role in the whole incident, and thus leaving her out of the discussion, or that they truly believe that it started as a grass roots movement and had nothing to do with the leadership up top. Such an argument would square with Katharine Carl’s assessment mentioned in the previous chapter, as well as Wu-Yung’s recollection that many people supported “the Boxers [...] because they felt the country’s shame, and because the missionaries were unprincipled and overbearing, [and thus] the people’s opposition to foreigners was very strong [and] they welcomed a chance to unite and get their revenge” in any possible way.<sup>222</sup> Regardless of the reason for the war, the fact remains that there are many contradicting accounts of how Cixi found herself at the war at the turn of the century, effectively making that episode of history incredibly confusing and difficult to understand.

The discussion thus far has demonstrated a major problem. Namely, that the non-sinological academic writings treated here have done virtually nothing to solve the many debates about Cixi’s reign that have existed since her own lifetime. This is best exemplified by the deep rooted conflict found between the works of Lailder and Seagrave. These two authors, although writing only a decade apart from one another, and within the last twenty years, provide highly contrasting accounts of Cixi. That such opposing perspectives have been published so recently is a clear reminder that even the

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<sup>221</sup> Duiker and Momani, *Twentieth-Century World History*, 13.

<sup>222</sup> Wu, *Flight of an Empress*, 18.

scholarly world in the West still has yet to gain a full understanding of this mysterious ruler and her true identity.

### **Chapter Three: Alterations in Western Judgements of Cixi**

Based on my discussions in Chapters One and Two, it is clear that Cixi is still not a well understood individual in the West. In particular, a lot of questionable information has in many ways overshadowed whatever valid knowledge of her that is actually available. For this reason, Sterling Seagrave states that “any study of her must really be a study of those who demonized her,” because the existing literature concerning her “is all nonsense, slander, and mischief, motivated by greed, racism, sexism, and plain everyday wickedness.”<sup>223</sup> His assertion that every publication preceding his own had portrayed Cixi negatively is certainly inaccurate, as there are indeed authors in the past that painted a rather positive image of her. However, Seagrave’s overall argument that different ideologies in the West, such as racism and sexism have driven many Western writers to invent “facts” about Cixi is indeed correct. In addition to racism and sexism, other ideologies such as imperialism and Orientalism, as well as anti-colonialism and feminism, just to name a few, have also had different impacts on how Western authors have viewed and perceived Cixi.

The objective of this chapter is to examine how different ideologies in the West have impacted both popular literature and scholarly publications on Cixi. The chapter will also try to discover what information about her was invented by Western authors and why. The fabrication of information and the attempt to make it believable is no easy task. It requires both imagination and creativity. For instance, in the case of his “memories”

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<sup>223</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 262.

regarding Cixi, Edmund Backhouse was able to “bring off one of the greatest and most durable hoaxes ever perpetuated” with his fairy-tale accounts, which had been believable enough to be referenced in “not only popular biography but [also] basic scholarly works.” Backhouse, however, succeeded in duping people only after a great deal of effort, including fabricating both the story itself and relevant evidence, such as the *Ching Shan Diary*.<sup>224</sup> Of course, one question is why would anyone even bother to go through such trouble to do this? The answer lies in both the ideological positions of these Western writers and Cixi’s unique place in history.

In many respects, as William J. Duiker and Bessma Momani point out, “the Empress Dowager was the most powerful figure in late-nineteenth-century China,” a fact that automatically makes her story significant.<sup>225</sup> For this reason alone, if not to mention her role in global affairs as well, it is necessary for the Western society to come to a firm understanding of her. However, this was an impossible task because, compared with other national leaders of her calibre, information about her was severely limited and incomplete. As a result, much of the supposed “knowledge” we have of her today is actually a product of guess-work. Moreover, for the last century or so, she has been a historiographical puppet whose image constantly changed according to differing ideological trends in the West. When the Western public generally held a negative attitude toward China and, Chinese people, including Chinese women, from imperialistic, orientalist, racist or sexist perspectives, she was recreated as a villain. When such public opinions in the West changed under the influence of anti-colonialism, feminism and other recent ideologies, Cixi was made into a heroine. Seeing that “World War II was

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<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

<sup>225</sup> Duiker and Momani, *Twentieth-Century World History*, 14.

the major factor for decolonization in Asia,” and that the “Women’s Liberation [Movement] in the 1960s attacked the all-pervading sexism of Western society,” she should be more favorably portrayed after 1949 than before, of which was indeed the case, but this year is not a firm divide, as there are positive and negative descriptions of her in both eras.<sup>226</sup> Furthermore, because each author’s depiction of the Empress is developed from their own facts, some of which may have even been fabricated by themselves, the scholarly community has been left with a vast number of conflicting and untrustworthy opinions of who she was.

### *Cixi as a Foil for Western Imperialism, Orientalism, and Anti-colonialism*

As the previous two chapters have shown, the image of Cixi in Western literature is highly varied. She could be portrayed as a heroine at one moment, and then a villainess in the next, depending on who was writing about her. This prompts the need to understand why such differing perspectives exist. While the answer partly lies in the use of guess-work to fill the knowledge void surrounding her identity, a greater factor seems to be the ideological influences that have shaped the imagination of Western authors and led them to view Cixi either negatively or positively. More specifically, Western imperialism and the closely related phenomenon of Orientalism, as well as the opposite ideologies of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, all have left different impacts on how Cixi is seen by writers in the West.

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<sup>226</sup> Teed, *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century History*, 118, 150.

In its simplest form, as Peter Teed explained, “Imperialism [is the] extension of a country’s influence over others less powerful [through] the acquisition of colonies to build an empire, [and] was widely advocated in Western Europe on the eve of World War I.”<sup>227</sup> Certainly, negative portrayals of Cixi by Western scholars in the early period served to provide an excuse for the imperialist conquest of her Empire. To phrase it differently, in order to appear reasonable and justified when attempting to colonize China, foreign powers needed to paint Cixi as a tyrannical woman who ruled over a population that was desperate to be liberated from her grasp. This is why Seagrave indicates that “even now, [the] reptilian image of the Empress dowager is difficult to shake because it provides a satisfying justification for Western actions in China during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, actions that otherwise look foolish or outrageous” because of their invasive nature. In other words, the “monstrous picture of the ‘Old Buddha’ [...] confirmed everyone’s worst suppositions and prejudices” about her, of which in turn made the Western encroachment upon Qing territory appear acceptable.<sup>228</sup>

Imperialist aggression in Asia, including China was further justified with the concept of Orientalism. As Edward W. Said has indicated, this concept “was a frank acknowledgement that [there] was a world elsewhere, apart from the ordinary attachments, sentiments, and values of *our* world in the West.” This effectively created “one of the deepest and more recurring images of the Other,” or basically the understanding amongst Westerners that the “people over there [in Asia] were not like ‘us’

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<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>228</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 9-10, 15.

and didn't appreciate 'our' values."<sup>229</sup> This ideological trend had an immense impact on the historical understanding of China, including Chinese historical figures like Cixi.

Under the impact of Orientalism and imperialism, Westerners came to see themselves as being not only different from, but simply better than everyone else in the world. They believed that "the Orient existed as a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce," which in turn made it justifiable to conquer because, as Said explains, this view presented "the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, [end] even redemption." To put it in different terms, "Orientals require conquest, and [...] a Western conquest of the Orient was not conquest after all, but liberty," since "the very possibility of development, transformation, [and] human movement [...] is denied the Orient and the Oriental" unless they are exposed to it via imperialism.<sup>230</sup> In other words, according to this understanding, it was therefore a privilege for the lands of Asia and Africa to be incorporated into a Western empire.

Der Ling's critique of the Qing leaders, and their handling of the Boxer Conflict, provides a firm example of how Asians were viewed through the lenses of Orientalism. In one of her memoirs, she claimed that when "the foreign troops [...] entered Peking, [with a] sharp reprisal against the Boxers," her father remarked that "this [is] a much needed lesson to the Manchus [as] we are so conservative we are not fit to rule." This seems to be an open plea for Europeans to come and take control of China, which at the time, was terribly weak and in desperate need to be colonized. Along with this, she went on to assert that she "liked foreign ways far better than Chinese ways" of doing things because "foreigners did things faster and more efficiently," which when taken together with her

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<sup>229</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), xx, 1, 190.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 172, 206, 208.

overall argument, demonstrates that she views Western culture more favorably than that of the East.<sup>231</sup> While Der Ling's personal history with the Qing Imperial Court might make her comments here seem rather ironic at first, the truth is, she had already severed her ties with China by the times she published these statements, as she became "the wife of an American" and moved "to America at the end of the 1920s."<sup>232</sup>

In addition to generating unfavorable portrayals of Asia and its people, imperialism and Orientalism were also responsible for creating much of the negative imagery surrounding Cixi, and the reason is quite simple. It appears that to justify the conquest of China, or at least in support of the colonial agendas of their home countries at the time, Western writers used stories to depict Cixi as a ruler so degenerate that not only did she commit adultery, such as her alleged relations with Jung Lu and even murder of her own son, as mentioned earlier, but also ruined the chance of her Empire for modernization. This description, built by many Western authors discussed in the previous chapters, more or less reflect the influences of imperialism and Orientalism. It must, however, not be forgotten that there are also positive portrayals of Cixi as well, and they are the product of entirely different ideological forces.

While Seagrave briefly examined the impacts of colonialism or imperialism on the Western perception of Cixi in the past, he completely failed to notice that anti-colonialism or anti-imperialism also influenced such Western perception. His analysis focuses so heavily on the cause of why "Tzu Hsi was assigned [so many] perverse characteristics," that he totally ignores all the positive portrayals of her in literature. Thus,

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<sup>231</sup> Der Ling, *Kowtow*, 196, 197, 296.

<sup>232</sup> Grant Hayter-Menzies, *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 259.

he concludes that not only past but even “recent books [...] adhere to this false portrayal of Tzu Hsi and her role in China’s history.”<sup>233</sup> This view, of course, is problematic. Although it is true that Cixi received a great deal of negative coverage in Western publications, not all authors illustrated her in the same way. In fact, some Western authors, such as Sarah Pike Conger, actually wrote in her defence, trying their best to uphold a favorable representation of her. Their work is harder to explain by the same imperialistic logic.

Unlike the negative portrayals of Cixi, the positive ones generally represented the stance against colonialism. This perspective found expression in Conger’s work regarding Cixi, even though Conger was the wife of an American diplomat in China around 1900. Conger strongly condemned the aggressive ambitions of European nations to expand their territory, stating that “the Chinese wish to be let alone in their own land,” but “why cannot foreigners let [their country] alone with her own?” “The Chinese are not a warlike people [...] and have no desire to intermingle with other nations,” and thus, if “they wish to be let alone” then so be it, as no one has the right to encroach upon their land without their express permission.<sup>234</sup>

This is the reason why Conger felt that Cixi was not necessarily in the wrong for instigating the Boxer conflict, stating that “my sympathies are with China,” because “China has been wronged, and in her desperation she has striven as best she could to stop the inroads, and to blot out those already made” by the imperial powers. “The Chinese Empire and the Boxers joined hands to fight the outside world and everything foreign, [in

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<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 262.

<sup>234</sup> Conger, *Letters from China*, 34, 175, 176.

order] to bring back the former China and her doings.” Conger found this totally justified, especially since “the Chinese [simply] wish to be let alone in their land.”<sup>235</sup>

Carl was another American who expressed such anti-colonialism in her writing, as well as her general disapproval of Orientalism. This came through most in her argument that Europeans were actually less civilized than Asians, since the former have proven themselves to be little more than mindless aggressors through their constant efforts to invade and conquer Qing territory. For the purpose of building their empires, as she explains, “the European Christian soldier in China has burned, destroyed, and killed in as much barbarity as the heathen.” She found evidence of this gratuitous violence everywhere, such as in “the ruins of the old Summer Palace, destroyed by Europeans” in 1860. This is not to also mention that “so much damage was done” to “both [...] Peking Palaces” right “after the Boxer Uprising [...] when foreign troops were stationed in [...] them.”<sup>236</sup> While part of the justification for colonialism came from the belief that it would spread progress to the “Orient,” according to Carl’s view, it seems to be doing the exact opposite, that is, bringing destruction and nothing else.

To Carl, Europeans were themselves barbaric for trying to conquer the territory of others, leaving her to conclude that “the Chinese [...] have not much reason [...] to admire our much vaunted civilization.”<sup>237</sup> This argument that she made is extremely important because it represents the beginnings of a new anti-imperialistic attitude, which seemingly also influenced her to take a stance against Orientalism as well, denouncing Western ideas of superiority as false. Her positions shows the close relationship between

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<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, 175, 176.

<sup>236</sup> Carl, *With the Empress Dowager*, 153, 200.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

colonialism and the belief in Western supremacy, since opposing one meant being against both.

It is, however, important to take a moment to note the irony associated with the anti-colonial attitude of Conger and Carl because both of them were Americans in China but they speak out against the perspective taken by many contemporaries from the West. Conger explained that her book was aimed to “reveal a little of the real character of the Chinese [...] and help to correct the widespread and erroneous ideas about China and her people” that had been providing the foreign powers with an excuse to invade and conquer much of Asia.<sup>238</sup> This was the same rationale that Carl gave for producing her memoir. She stated that her purpose was to reverse some of the negative misconceptions of Cixi by working “to publish a simple and truthful narrative of [her] experiences” while serving in the Qing court.<sup>239</sup> This, however, is probably not the only reason why these two women condemned foreign imperialism in China.

Aside from their personal views of the Orient, both Carl and Conger were from America, and as such, they probably supported, or were at least heavily influenced by the “Open Door Policy,” which represented their country’s foreign policy toward China around the time of the Boxer uprising. Instead of partaking in “the scramble for concessions, [...] the United States” promoted “the preservation of Chinese territorial and administrative integrity” because it favoured “the idea of equal commercial opportunity in China” for all foreign countries. The main principle behind this approach is the belief that “a power would not interfere with [...] the vested interest of any other power” in

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<sup>238</sup> Conger, *Letters from China*, vii.

<sup>239</sup> Carl, *With the Empress Dowager*, xxiii.

China.<sup>240</sup> Thus, this American policy still reflected foreign imperialism in late Qing China, but its opposition to direct foreign occupation of Chinese territory was close to anti-colonialism. Certainly, Conger and Carl embraced a primitive type of anti-colonialism and defended Cixi in the Boxer movement probably also because of their friendly relations with her and her court.

According to Teed, anti-colonialism became a stronger ideology in the West “since 1923, [with the] dismantlement of [many European] Empires through decolonization.” It has also found stronger expression in the recent publications that defended Cixi in the anti-foreign movement of the Boxers.<sup>241</sup> No longer needing to justify the conquest of China in modern times, portrayals of the Empress naturally became more favorable, as exemplified by Hussey’s assessment in 1949. In his opinion, the Boxer conflict was instigated by Cixi as an act of defence rather than aggression. That is, it was the beginning the long fifty year process from 1900 onwards that was needed to curb foreign imperial aggression against China. Hussey claimed that although “the Manchu and Chinese negotiators and Empress Tz’u Hsi understood that [...] they had lost the war [and failed] to [expel] the foreigners” from their country, “the Chinese prophesied another Boxer uprising within fifty years. They were true prophets. Another uprising did come—forty-eight years later. This time it is called the Communist uprising,” and it proved successful.<sup>242</sup>

A more detailed version of this argument was made by Haldane fifteen years later, whereby she claimed that

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<sup>240</sup> Hsu, “Late Ch’ing Foreign Relations,” 113, 115.

<sup>241</sup> Teed, *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century History*, 213

<sup>242</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 302.

It was owing to the extraordinary alliance that occurred in 1900 between Her Imperial Majesty Tzu Hsi and the Boxers as the result of their common aims, that she became the Motherly and Auspicious Ancestress of the Chinese Revolution which only forty-eight years later culminated in the People's Republic [in 1949].<sup>243</sup>

Of course, the reference being made here is that it was not until nearly half a century after Cixi's initial efforts that, as historian Geremie R. Barmé explains, "Mao [successfully] ruled a China that was effectively closed off from the West."<sup>244</sup> Thus, as Haldane concludes, if she were still alive today,

Old Buddha could hardly help a smug smile of satisfaction at seeing how completely and literally present the Chinese régime [...] has fulfilled and vindicated her patriotic ambition to free Chinese territory from foreign domination and to reclaim every scrap of it that was torn from the motherland.<sup>245</sup>

While Haldane's work certainly provides a strong example of how anti-colonialism affected literature, an even better example is Seagrave's book, which goes far beyond justifying Cixi's actions during the Boxer Incident, arguing instead that the whole conflict was actually instigated by the foreign powers as part of their plan to conquer the Qing empire. It all began when "a majority of allied fleet commanders had voted to attack," and "started a shooting war with China [...] to seize as much territory as possible." "The transference of blame to the empress dowager was [therefore] a deliberate manipulation of the facts." Seagrave claimed that she was in no way the aggressor, yet writers, such as the ones discussed before, have continued to treat her as such. As a result, "most Western histories have insisted that in [an] edict Tzu Hsi

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<sup>243</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 169.

<sup>244</sup> Geremie R. Barmé, "To Screw Foreigners is Patriotic: China's Avant-Garde Nationalist," *The China Journal* 34 (July 1995): 209-234. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2950138> (accessed February 22, 2013), 213.

<sup>245</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 266.

‘declared war on the world,’ implying by the phrasing that she was daft [but] this was hardly the case.” If this is true, then it was “the Allied attack [that] began the war,” not her.<sup>246</sup>

Furthermore, Seagrave claims that “most of the killing before and during the siege [of foreign legations in Beijing in 1900] was carried out by Westerners, not Chinese, [and that] the empress dowager’s military commanders spent most of the siege trying to stop the shooting [and] not the other way around.”<sup>247</sup> Thus, in his eyes, the only aggressors of the Boxer Conflict were the Western imperialists, and Cixi was just a helpless monarch who was trying to defend her Empire from their encroachment. By no means, then, should she be accused or blamed for instigating the violence.

All of this, however, should by no means suggest that imperialistic attitudes completely disappeared with the onset of decolonization. Having been such an important ideology before, many aspects of colonialism still survive and continue to influence writers today, despite the fact that European Empires have long since disappeared. For instance, traces of Orientalism is found even in the most recent literature on Cixi, as can be seen in the work of Keith Laidler, which provides a very negative image of the Empress Dowager. Nevertheless, his book is a bit of an outlier, and it can still be said that most recent publications on Her Majesty illustrate her more positively than those of the past.

From the above we can conclude that two major ideological trends influencing Western literature on Cixi can be roughly divided on the line of pro- and anti-colonialism and Orientalism. This division, however, was not exclusive, as there were many authors

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<sup>246</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 288, 332.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

who manifest elements of both. For instance, although Hussey champions the idea of European supremacy to a certain extent through judging the “Manchus [as] a mixed population of less than six hundred thousand, with little culture, [and] no wealth,” he also condemns foreign encroachment on Chinese territory by arguing that Cixi was justified in her violent, but unsuccessful attempt to defend her Empire in the Boxer war.<sup>248</sup>

Therefore, it is difficult to strictly classify Western writers of Cixi into ideological categories. Indeed, the purpose of the analysis in this chapter is not to separate the authors of literature on Cixi into opposing camps or to label them in any specific way, but is rather to help establish an understanding of what political forces influenced them and their work. Along with imperialism, Orientalism, and anti-colonialism, sexism and feminism have also left different impacts on Western publications about Cixi

### *Sexism vs. Feminism in Western Literature on Cixi*

The major ideological trends in early Western Literature on Cixi, imperialism and Orientalism, were often closely related with another Western ideological concept, that of which being sexism, which involves the practice of “discrimination on [the] basis of sex.”<sup>249</sup> As Said explains, “Orientalism also encouraged a peculiarly [...] male conception of the world [which] is especially evident in the writing of travelers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy.” Thus, in the minds of such Westerners who subscribed to Orientalist ideology, “the Orient [became] a place where one could

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<sup>248</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, xiii, 14, 119, 123.

<sup>249</sup> *Harper Collins Pocket Webster's Dictionary*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.vv. “sex,” (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 499.

look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe.”<sup>250</sup> Indeed, it was no coincidence that the predominantly negative political judgements of Cixi usually come from the same authors who were responsible for generating much of the sexual slander about her. In contrast, feminist defense of Cixi also appeared quite early in Western publications and have continued in the recent literature.

The sexist attitude toward Cixi was most noticeable in the works of Edmund Backhouse, Daniele Varè, Harry Hussey, and Keith Laidler. Along with his various arguments about her, Edmund Backhouse also painted the Empress as a promiscuous “Oriental” woman by claiming that even he, a foreign man, managed to have intercourse with her, despite Chinese conservatism having prevented her from even meeting a Westerner until just a few years before.<sup>251</sup> He then went on to provide a very vivid description of his experience in her bedroom:

The Empress took my penis into her mouth and continued titillation with her tongue [and] at her command I took in my hands her abnormally large clitoris, pressed toward it my lips and performed a low but steady friction which increased its size. [Then] she allowed me to fondle her breasts which were those of a young married woman [and] her shapely buttocks pearly and large were presented to my admiring contemplation [before] Her Majesty bade me place my scented fingers inside her vulva and apply my lips to its ample surface.

After all of this allegedly occurred, it is said that Cixi told Backhouse: “You are now permitted to have me, but just before you are coming, let me know [as] I want you to take your tool out and put it in my mouth, so that I may swallow the semen and thus

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<sup>250</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 190, 207.

<sup>251</sup> Bland and Backhouse, *China Under the Empress Dowager*, v; Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 9.

enjoy a tonic.”<sup>252</sup> Backhouse’s account of this sexual escapade goes on much longer than this quotation. However it is unnecessary to include the rest of it here because the total fabrication of his claims has already been made clear.

This fabricated story, as in the cases discussed by Said, typically reflected the idea of a Western colonialist who “associates the Orient with the escapism of sexual fantasy,” since “the [...] women [there apparently] express unlimited sensuality, [...] are more or less stupid, and above all [...] are willing” to deliver the greatest satisfaction to the foreign men who visit them.<sup>253</sup> Indeed, Backhouse claimed that the Empress gave him “an enormous orgasm,” and that he “felt for her a real libidinous passion such as no woman has ever inspired in my pervert homosexual mind before nor since.”<sup>254</sup> This story, of course, does not have any testable evidential backing, but rather offers a perfect example of how imperialism and Orientalism influenced the sexist imagination of some Western authors, leading them to create stories that portray the lands and people of Asia as being destined for domination by Westerners.

Sexism also appeared in the work of Daniele Varè, who considered Cixi’s female gender as one of her greatest flaws. As he explained, “in her complex character we find a combination of womanly qualities [...] and womanly defects [such as how] she was impatient of delay.” Such defects led her down the path of making rash and irrational decisions that often had disastrous outcomes. This can be seen for instance, in “her advice of uncompromising resistance” “against the advance of the ‘foreign devils’” during the Arrow War, although she did not have “any real knowledge of the forces with which she

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<sup>252</sup> Edmund Trelawny Backhouse, *Décadence Mandchoue: The China Memories of Sir Edmund Trelawny Backhouse*, ed. Derek Sandhaus (Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books, 2011), 71-72.

<sup>253</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 190, 207.

<sup>254</sup> Backhouse, *Décadence Mandchoue*, 71.

had to deal.”<sup>255</sup> In other words, through sheer female impulsiveness, she forced her empire into entering a conflict that it inevitably lost.

Continuing with this belief in female imperfections, Hussey provided a colourful story of how Cixi, because she was “just a woman with all a woman’s weaknesses,” came to be extremely emotionally distraught as she “had not been leading a normal sex life since the death of Hsien Feng.” He claimed that she turned to a physician named Yao Pao-sheng, who caught her attention through his clever diagnosis when she was ill. Soon afterwards, “Dr. Yao and Tz’u Hsi were spending far more time together than his professional duties seemed to warrant, [and] Tz’u Hsi became pregnant” with his child. If this account is actually true, then “somewhere in China a son of the great Empress probably lives today, perhaps unaware of his imperial parentage.” This bizarre story is not supported by any evidence and apparently just reflected the Western author’s sexist fantasy.<sup>256</sup>

This story is representative of a broader Western perception of the promiscuous nature of “Oriental” women, as discussed by Said. In this case, a male Chinese commoner had not only been able to have intercourse with Cixi, but also produced a child with her. This was deemed in all respects completely unacceptable from the Manchu’s perspective. As Hussey explained, “broad-minded as the Manchus were in most things, when it came to the reputation of the Empress and the purity of their Manchu blood, the Household Rules would have made no exception.” Thus, he remarks that this “great woman showed some of the disastrous weaknesses of her sex combined with the impersonality of a

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<sup>255</sup> Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 21-22, 23.

<sup>256</sup> Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 242, 244, 245.

dictator.”<sup>257</sup> In other words, Hussey is basically arguing that Cixi was an autocratic ruler who was carried away by the lusts typical of the female gender.

Finally, Keith Laidler, who was shown earlier to portray Cixi negatively in general, also described her in a very gender demeaning way as well, arguing that it was only “thanks to her abilities in the bedchamber [that] she [...] beg[a]n her rise to prominence.” As he continues, “for a woman in China, [...] the bedroom was often the only route to influence and authority [and thus] Yehonala may have come to see sexual prowess as a means of empowering herself.” He even claimed that she “dedicated much of the first five years of her time in the harem to practising every means at her disposal to please a lover.” For Laidler, as he looked at her history, she must have succeeded in doing so and seduced Xianfeng, because it was not long before she “took her first taste of power.”<sup>258</sup>

The writings of these four authors clearly exhibit elements of sexism, with most of them depicting Cixi as a rather promiscuous individual, although it is worth noting that their literature became less sexist over time. While Backhouse presented the Empress as a woman who was willing to have intercourse with foreign men, Hussey limited her sexual indulgences to only that of a Chinese man. Laidler went further still, never implying that her bed was shared with anybody other than the Emperor. This suggests that sexism is losing its influence on Western scholars, but this should not be surprising since it is a product of Orientalism, which developed from imperialism, and therefore the gradual disappearance of sexism with the onset on decolonization, makes perfect sense.

Nevertheless, despite having weakened over the years, sexism still had a major influence

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<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv, 245.

<sup>258</sup> Laidler, *The Last Empress*, 2, 3, 58, 59.

on Western writers, leading them to either make their own, or believe the existing fairy-tales fabricated by others. In regards to the aforementioned authors, none of their claims regarding Cixi's sexual escapades are firmly grounded in any evidence. For instance, there really is not much supporting Laidler's and Hussey's stories other than Collis' own questionable conclusion that she successfully seduced her husband with the cunning "tricks of making love," and as a widow, was caught having an affair when "a pair of man's boots along with her shoes outside of the curtain of her bed" were discovered.<sup>259</sup> Backhouse's account is even less believable considering that, as Conger explained, society back then was so conservative that "Chinese women never see foreign men and seldom [even] meet men of their own people," so how could he possibly have had intercourse with Her Majesty?<sup>260</sup> That this question appears completely rhetorical demonstrates the extent to which imagination was used to invent and create descriptions of the Empress.

With all of this in mind, that these stories have been challenged by several authors is only natural. The significance of such challenge, however, is not only that these revisionist authors from the West have presented different arguments, but also that they tend to portray Cixi more favourably from a feminist stance, or at least one that is highly critical of sexist ideals. Seagrave, for instance, directly discredits the story of Backhouse's "long, raunchy love affair with Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi," calling it a product of "the heavy underlying theme of sexual perversion that runs obsessively through [all] his biographies of Tzu Hsi."<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 60-67, 121.

<sup>260</sup> Conger, *Letters from China*, 50.

<sup>261</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 14.

Also arguing against these stories of Cixi's debauchery, Charlotte Haldane claims that she had lived the life of a faithful widow after her husband died. "Instead of being a woman of appalling sexual depravity, she was quite the reverse and was in fact sex-starved." It is said that Cixi only remained sane because "she sublimated her sexual instincts successfully in the achievement of her tremendous ambition" to rule.<sup>262</sup> Haldane's portrayals of Cixi do not always remain positive throughout her book, as shown in Chapter one. That being said, however, she does turn around to argue that the Empress at times had to commit necessary evils in order to survive as a female ruler. She "was a woman, often secretly worried, acutely anxious, and on rare occasions even panic-stricken." But she still managed to keep her composure at most times, and "her most notorious crimes [like] the elimination of A-lu-te [or] conniving at the debauching of her son," were only committed out of dire necessity and "not out of personal spite."<sup>263</sup> Such an image of Cixi depicts a woman who despite facing threats from all angles, still managed to live and thrive as a ruler.

Haldane was, however, not the first person to recognize the significance of Cixi's rise to power, which she achieved only after overcoming great gender disparities between men and women. Half a century earlier, Conger explained that "for forty-seven years this able woman has stood at the head of the Chinese Empire, and strong men have given their support [despite being] in a land where woman has had so little official standing" and no status in society, since the common understanding was that "the honor of woman was her childbearing [abilities], and the more boys the greater the honor."<sup>264</sup> Grant Hayter-

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<sup>262</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 263.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 263, 264.

<sup>264</sup> Conger, *Letters from China*, 50, 377.

Menzies also shared this admiration for Her Majesty, stating that she had somehow, against all odds, “survived her rise at the imperial court, and [...] stayed on top.” He remarked that the many things she did seemed “to show that while men might make rules, women were free to disregard them.” According to him, one of the best examples of this was when “Sarah [Conger] and the empress dowager [...] reunited in the winter of 1902.” Many believed “that something other than friendship—namely politics—motivated” this meeting and tried their best to forestall it, and

While the men of the diplomatic corps could not prevent Sarah and the other ladies from participating in a second audience with Cixi on February 27, they did all they could to put a damper on the proceedings. “The foreign ministers requested that no presents be given to the ladies by the Court,” Sarah wrote to [her daughter]. It was an insult to both Cixi, as if she were trying to purchase favors, and to Sarah, as if her favors were to be bought, and a sad comment on how women were seen from within the male enclave of foreign diplomacy. In any event this new rule had no effect on the tone of Cixi’s audience—if anything, it clearly made both Sarah and the dowager more determined than ever to carry on as though nothing were amiss. [Indeed when] Cixi took Sarah aside and asked her sit with her on her bed, [...] Cixi “took a small jade baby boy from the shelf,” recalled Sarah, “tucked it into my hand, and with actions interpreted her unspoken words, ‘Don’t tell.’ I took the dear little thing home, and I prize it.”<sup>265</sup>

This of course, was not the only thing that the Empress did in protest against male dominance. As mentioned earlier, she also assumed the “colloquial sobriquet, Lao Fo Ye (literally, ‘Old Buddha’), [whereby] the character *ye* [is] an honorific suffix for males.” This “suggests that Cixi did not always think of herself as a woman [but rather] as the patriarchal sovereign [of China] with the power to emasculate [even] the emperor,” and to demonstrate this, she “insisted that the Guangxu emperor address her as ‘father,’ not as ‘mother’.” That “the Empress Dowager compelled those around her to call her Lao Fo Ye

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<sup>265</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 97, 206, 210, 211.

(Old Buddha) [because] she liked being treated as a (powerful) man” is thus obvious, but more importantly, she embraced this nickname as a symbol of her struggle to break the gender barrier.<sup>266</sup> In this she certainly succeeded, and became who Der Ling described as “the most powerful person in China [and for a time,] was even called the ‘only man in China’.”<sup>267</sup> Her efforts however, were aimed at far more than just self enrichment, and were actually part of a much wider campaign to improve female rights in general.

Along with defying men, Conger observed that “this great woman [had a] marked love for her country and for her people, and [had] earnestly [been] reaching out to uplift the masses and to increase woman’s usefulness.” A good example of her efforts is in how “private schools for girls of both the higher and lower classes [were] started throughout China [after being] planned and sanctioned by the Throne,” which was a big change for a society where “the streets [...] thronged with men, but women were seldom seen” as their sole purpose in life was until then, simply to remain at home and bare children.<sup>268</sup> Adding to this, Philip W. Sergeant explained that

There was hardly a department of public or private life in China which was not affected by Tze-hi’s zeal for reformation, from women’s fashions (as early as February, 1902, she issued an edict against foot-binding) and men’s indulgences, like opium, to office-holding under government.<sup>269</sup>

Thus, for Conger and Sergeant, along with her achievements in becoming a female ruler, she should also have been recognized for her efforts towards establishing “social equality” between the sexes.

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<sup>266</sup> Lydia H. Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 151, 164.

<sup>267</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha*, 188.

<sup>268</sup> Conger, *Letters from China*, 317, 372, 376.

<sup>269</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 274.

Indeed, Hayter-Menzies regarded Cixi's efforts to establish gender parity as her largest contribution to history, since "the improvement in women's status [that] communism brought about" began with her initial reforms, which although did not immediately reshape society, started a long process of change that was completed "later in the twentieth century by Mao Zedong's communist government."<sup>270</sup> Here, the Empress' push for female equality is presented as part of the wider movement toward feminist liberation, which eventually found success after the People's Republic was formed in 1949, around the same time that China, as Hussey and Haldane pointed out earlier, finally triumphed in expelling all foreigners.

Thus, collectively speaking, the work of Hussey, Haldane, and Hayter-Menzies seem to suggest that Chinese resistance to Western imperialism and its related concepts, such as colonialism and sexism, originated with Cixi. This is a point that Sinologist Lydia H. Liu appears to agree with, as she argued that "the [...] effective reign" of "Empress Dowager Cixi [...] saw a number of new social developments [which] raise some fundamental issues about gender and empire that [brought] about new ideas concerning [...] femininity, diplomacy, and international politics." These changes led many to see "Empress Dowager Cixi as the mother of the nation [who] embodied [...] a sovereign ideal that had come under the threat of the Western powers but had not otherwise succumbed to colonial rule" because of her efforts to oppose it.<sup>271</sup> Along with being recognized as a powerful ruler, Her Majesty should therefore, also be upheld as a symbol of Chinese freedom and independence.

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<sup>270</sup> Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 43, 277.

<sup>271</sup> Liu, *The Clash of Empires*, 140, 141.

The points made in the previous paragraphs suggests that there is a connection between feminism and anti-colonialism in much the same way that sexism is a product of Orientalism and imperialism. This association becomes even more apparent when considering that most of the aforementioned “feminist” authors, such as Conger, Hussey, Haldane, and Seagrave, were all shown to be against the expansion of Western empires earlier in this chapter. It therefore seems that those who support decolonization also advocate gender equality.

In summary, the ideological trends that have influenced Western literature on Cixi seem to be interrelated to some extent. Generally speaking, the Western writers who champion imperialism and Orientalism tend to fabricate sexist slanders or other negative accounts about Cixi. In contrast, those who are against colonialism tend or tended to paint more positive feminist pictures of the Empress Dowager, and some of them did so probably also because they were female associates of her.

Understanding the various portrayals of Cixi in literature in the West is a complicated task that requires the arduous work of identifying how different ideological trends have affected different writers. This chapter has explored how imperialism, anti-colonialism, Orientalism, sexism, and feminism have shaped the perception of Cixi in the West, but it has not analyzed everything as there are still other ideologies, such as racism and racial equalitarianism, that also have left a major impact as well. To examine every single political ideology that has affected the Western construction of Cixi’s image is impossible to do in a study of this length. A fuller discussion must await future research.

## Conclusion

The main argument of this study is that the importance of Cixi in modern Chinese and world history, the lack of information about her and the urge to get such information, as well as the impacts of different ideologies, all contributed to a general misunderstanding of who she was, which is exemplified by the many contradicting portrayals of her that appear in Western texts. Certainly, this is not to say that Western literature does not contribute anything valuable to the present day discussion on the Empress, as some publications, especially those written by her close associates, could include normally unavailable data of historical value, but awareness of the problems each of them have, makes it necessary to learn more about their authors. To do this, a number of individuals and their work on Her Majesty were examined in great detail throughout the course of three chapters.

The first two chapters listed and examined the various views Westerners had on each aspect of Cixi's life. It was discovered that there is very little consistency between individuals and their beliefs, as many conflicting claims about her were found. These contradictions range from discrepancies in simple matters regarding her childhood and adolescence, such as where and when she was born, to more complicated issues during her later years, like the death of her son. That so much disagreement exists amongst authors suggest a couple of important things: Firstly, that not everyone is correct, since Cixi could only, for instance, have one place of birth; and secondly, that some of the stories concerning Her Majesty are fabricated, which would explain why they conflict

with other accounts, but to separate the falsities from the truths is a nearly impossible task.

This of course, prompts the need to ask, what drove people to fabricate stories about Her Majesty? Chapter Three was dedicated to answering this question, and it determined that ideological influence was one of the major causes. Specifically, it looked at how imperialism affected Western writers, who were driven to portray the Empress in Orientalist and sexist ways, when the colonial ambitions of their nations were brought to China.<sup>272</sup> The reason was simple, in that the conquest of her country could be made to look justified so long as she was depicted as a poor ruler that needed to be replaced.<sup>273</sup>

Having established the impact of imperialism, Chapter Three then turned to examine the effects of decolonization, which was found to have influenced writers in the exact opposite way, prompting them to portray the Empress rather positively, and often from a feminist perspective. This however, should be rather self-explanatory, since the disintegration of their empires meant that Western nations abandoned the conquest of China and thus, no longer needed to justify it by painting a negative picture of Her Majesty. It is therefore quite clear that ideology plays a large role in shaping the literature on Cixi, often determining the way in which she is presented.

The third chapter also highlighted the importance of 1949, which was when Mao's Communist Revolution at long last triumphed and the People's Republic was established. Both Harry Hussey and Charlotte Haldane recognized this as the moment when European colonialism in China decisively came to an end, as it was only then that foreigners were finally expelled from the country. Grant Hayter-Menzies also saw this as

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<sup>272</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 204, 205, 206-207.

<sup>273</sup> Seagrave, *Dragon Lady*, 15.

a significant time, since he felt that it was when Chinese women began to escape the clutches of patriarchy as feminism started to take hold. That the changes of 1949 played a role in shaping how Westerners perceived China meant that their view of the Empress was affected as well. In fact, all three authors discussed here claimed that these changes occurred simply because Cixi laid the groundwork for them during her reign.<sup>274</sup>

While the political changes in 1949 certainly played a role in shaping the Western perception of Cixi, there were events in other years that also had such an impact. For instance, it appears that she was portrayed more negatively in literature after the Qing Dynasty's collapse in 1912 than before. This is exemplified quite well by two of Der Ling's memoirs, the first published in 1911, and the second in 1929. For example, both of them describe the moment when Katharine A. Carl first met the Empress, but they offer very different assessments of what actually happened back then.

In 1911, Der Ling wrote that upon meeting Cixi, "Miss Carl went up to her and kissed her hand, which caused her great surprise [...] as it was not a Chinese custom [but] she naturally thought that it must be a foreign custom, and therefore said nothing about it."<sup>275</sup> This is a fair description that illustrates her Majesty as an open minded person who was willing to accept practices from other cultures. Roughly two decades later, however, in 1929 a very different account was given. This one claimed that "Her Majesty [...] did not understand" the Western custom and showed a "conservative attitude;" that is, Cixi "would permit none to touch her," allegedly saying that she "did not think it nice at all"

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<sup>274</sup> Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 169, 265, 266; Hayter-Menzies, *The Empress and Mrs. Conger*, 43, 277; Hussey, *Venerable Ancestor*, 302.

<sup>275</sup> Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1911), 236.

after “Miss Carl [...] attempted to kiss Her Majesty’s hand.”<sup>276</sup> In contrast to the former, this latter statement depicts the Empress as a conservative monarch who had no knowledge of, and was unwilling to learn about, the world outside of her own. The information taken from these two memoirs, despite their records of the same event, are obviously very different. The question of course, is why?

While it cannot be confirmed with the limited work done here, it does seem likely that Der Ling’s view of Cixi became more unfavorable after the Qing Empire collapsed. This should not come as a major surprise. Under the Qing, the Empress was hailed by some as one of China’s most incredible rulers and a quick look at the authors listed below will reveal the reason why. In Meribeth E. Cameron’s mind, it “was [only] the Dowager Empress [and] her indomitable energy [that] kept life in the dynasty,” which had already begun, as Haldane noted, its “disintegration [even] before the reign of her husband, the Hsien Feng Emperor.”<sup>277</sup> This was the attitude of Philip W. Sergeant in 1910 when he stated that ever since “Tze-hi’s death there was no more talk of the ‘break up of China’,” and as such, “even the most unfriendly historians are obliged to allow that her policy met with an astonishing amount of success.”<sup>278</sup>

Sergeant, of course, was not the only individual who praised Cixi for her apparent “successes.” Isaac Taylor Headland had displayed a similar attitude in his 1909 book, in which he argues that “the last six years of the Empress Dowager’s regency” were equal in greatness to the sixty year reigns of the “two Emperors, Kang Hsi and Chien Lung,

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<sup>276</sup> Der Ling, *Kowtow*, 238.

<sup>277</sup> Cameron, *The Reform Movement in China*, 182; Haldane, *The Last Great Empress*, 265.

<sup>278</sup> Sergeant, *The Great Empress Dowager*, 322.

[during] the most brilliant period of the ‘Great Pure [Qing] Dynasty’.”<sup>279</sup> Such acclaim, however, did not last long; it seems to have disappeared when China’s imperial history came to an end in 1912. From being hailed as the saviour who had rescued her Empire from imminent ruin, she became known as the “warrior woman [who] ruled over the Manchus and brought them to their doom.” Rather than treating her as a heroine, Daniele Varè, who published his book in 1936, blamed her for bringing “the end of the Empire and the downfall of the Manchus [because] she had miscalculated the strength of the forces which she had to face.”<sup>280</sup> Similarly, Maurice Collis concluded in 1943 “that after three hundred years of glory the Great Pure Dynasty was brought to ruin by an Empress Dowager.”<sup>281</sup> What does this have to do with Der Ling’s writing?

The main point to take away from the discussion above is that the perception of Cixi amongst Westerners appears to have gotten noticeably worse after the Qing Dynasty collapsed, which could account for why Der Ling portrayed the Empress more negatively in her later memoir. For that matter, the political upheavals of 1912 likely affected the views of many other Chinese and Western authors as well, although to determine how exactly is beyond the scope of this study, and therefore needs to be done at another time. Adding to all of this, 1932 was also an influential year, since it was when, as Peter Teed explained, “the last Emperor of China, Pu Yi, was established as [the] puppet ruler” of “Manchukuo, Japanese-occupied Manchuria.”<sup>282</sup> This was a major event which had an impact on individuals such as Reginald F. Johnston, who hailed it as the restoration of the Qing Dynasty by claiming that he “can already detect the first glimmer of [a] new dawn

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<sup>279</sup> Headland, *Court Life in China*, 35.

<sup>280</sup> Varè, *Last of the Empresses*, 238-239.

<sup>281</sup> Collis, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, 159-160.

<sup>282</sup> Latourette, “Introduction,” xi; Teed, *Dictionary of Twentieth-Century History*, 290.

[...] with the emergence of Manchuria” as a new state.<sup>283</sup> That this attitude affected his opinion of Cixi is probably certain, but to understand how would require a much deeper look at his literature and a lot more research in the future. In this sense, then, the work done here is just the beginning of a long process in unravelling the historiography on Her Majesty. While ideology obviously played a major role in shaping how people in the West viewed her, it certainly is not the only factor. There is still a great deal that needs to be done before all the factors involved can be understood and a more solidly documented understanding of Cixi can be established.

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<sup>283</sup> Johnston, *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, 18.

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