In the Hornets’ Nest

Pamela Crossley

_Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China_ by Jung Chang
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Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing dynasty is one of those historical figures who are renovated from time to time as the moment demands. In the first decade of the 20th century, she was either the vivacious tea hostess who had protected foreigners from Boxer mobs, or the murderous xenophobe who had set the rioters on them in the first place. In the 1960s and 1970s, she was one of a small collection of ‘powerful’ women newly discovered in Chinese history. And now she appears in the vanguard of stubborn Chinese opposition to foreign arrogance and encroachment. Since Sterling Seagrave’s _Dragon Lady_ of 1992, Cixi has been the subject of or a major figure in a dozen books, as well as films and television series. Still, we evidently need more Cixi.

Jung Chang does not merely repeat what are now truisms in the representation of Cixi – that she has been obscured by misogyny and orientalist stereotyping, as well as the anti-Manchu sentiment running through Chinese nationalist narratives – but also claims to have discovered something new. ‘Empress Dowager Cixi’s legacy was manifold and towering,’ she writes. Cixi ‘brought medieval China into the modern age’. Under her leadership, we are told, major technologies were introduced, medicine improved, military industrialisation undertaken and a free press encouraged. Cixi also ‘championed women’s liberation’, and did it all ‘without … violence and with relatively little upheaval’. If Chang is to be believed, Cixi should be considered a transformative figure in modern Chinese history, perhaps on the level of Mao Zedong, certainly the equal of Sun Yatsen or Chiang Kaishek.

Cixi, the daughter of an unremarkable Manchu official, was chosen for the harem of the Xianfeng emperor of the Qing dynasty in 1852. In 1856 she rose steeply in rank after giving
birth to the first (and as it happened only) male heir to the throne. When the emperor died in 1861, Cixi’s five-year-old son became the Tongzhi emperor. A regency of six male officials along with the late emperor’s highest-ranking widow, Ci’an, and the new imperial mother, Cixi, was empanelled, but within months the officials were removed by imperial princes. Cixi and Ci’an were the only remaining regents and Cixi herself was solely entrusted with the imperial seal that authenticated edicts issued from the court. The dowagers continued to govern, in the words of the official histories, by ‘listening from behind the screens’ of the throne room. The emperor married when he was 16, and the regency was dissolved.

When the young emperor contracted smallpox in late 1874, Cixi and Ci’an became regents once again. The emperor soon died, leaving no heir, so the two regent dowagers arranged for his cousin, aged three, to become the Guangxu emperor. Cixi adopted the new emperor as the son of the late Xianfeng emperor and herself, precluding the child’s mother from gaining control of the regency. Both the young widow of the Tongzhi emperor and the young mother of the Guangxu emperor committed suicide, and in 1881 Ci’an too died, of an unidentified illness, after years of tension with Cixi. Thereafter, according to Chang, Cixi accomplished her remarkable modernisations in industry, education, administration and foreign relations, all the while fending off plots by court and reactionaries, many of whom argued that real power should be in the hands of her adopted son, the emperor. She nonetheless pushed through new programmes in education and social legislation that would have changed China rapidly, had the Qing dynasty itself not been overthrown in a chaotic nationalist revolution in 1911-12.

This is the sort of interpretation that might be produced by someone who had studied the original records of the Qing court but lacked sufficient knowledge of the existing scholarship to be able to decrypt them. After 1850 the Qing imperial government was faced with the challenge of the Taiping rebels, whose blend of Christian, Manichean and Chinese folk influences was the basis for an impassioned movement which threatened to sweep from Guangxi province in the south-west all the way to Beijing. In an attempt to suppress the rebels, the imperial court devolved financial management, military command and certain legal jurisdictions to the provincial level in the most heavily embattled regions. After the war ended in 1864, the pressures of reconstruction and recovery from the bloodiest confrontation of the 19th century, in which the death toll may have been as high as forty million, forced the process of decentralisation to continue. The governors who had been specially empowered by the imperial court to fight the rebels were political ancestors of the infamous ‘warlords’ of the early 20th century.

The imperial court, or members of the imperial family at least, attempted at various points to
regather their prerogatives, notably by monopolising new diplomatic enterprises after 1861 or commanding the naval department in the 1880s. These plans were gradually discredited or the princes who sponsored them died, leaving the provincial governors – Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong most prominent among them – in charge not only of the domestic government but also of Qing foreign policy. The façade of the imperial government continued, but with titles and stipends taken up by the leading governors’ affiliates, allies or those whom they tolerated. The most important para-governmental organisation based on the new powers of provincial governors was the Beiyang Intendancy, whose headquarters were in the coastal city of Tianjin, less than a hundred miles from Beijing. From the Taiping War to the 1920s, each Beiyang Intendant in succession was the most powerful man in China. The first, Zeng Guofan, had fought the Taipings to preserve traditional values – above all loyalty to the emperors – and there appears to have been no point at which he considered making his powers de jure as well as de facto. That ethos persisted under Zeng’s acolyte Li Hongzhang, but when it gave out under Yuan Shikai in 1912, the empire was over.

The provincial governors and Beiyang Intendants sought imperial endorsement of their policies in education and technology. In the days of the juvenile Tongzhi emperor, that endorsement required the approval of his regent Cixi. To Chang, that means Cixi must have been the originator of the reforms. She persists with the same logic in her account of improvements in industrialisation and transportation in the 1880s and 1890s, and even the political and social reforms of the first decade of the 20th century. Chang presents Cixi as the originator, sometimes the lone originator, of reforms that in fact began in the provinces or in Fuzhou or Tianjin; as she tells the story, the rubber stamp is controlling the hand.

Cixi lived in the isolated hornets’ nest of the Forbidden City, in the Imperial City, in Beijing, a place where death was casually meted out to eunuchs, concubines and humble officials, and where power struggles were sometimes resolved by poison. She certainly had many of the qualities that Chang attributes to her: she was literate, which was unusual for women generally but not for women from such privileged Manchu families as hers; she was kind to her court favourites and dogs; she was interested in every sort of newfangled gadget, and sponsored their use as a way of bringing herself attention and prestige. She did not, as Chang seems to believe she did, invent or encourage a popular press, free or otherwise: that was done by coastal entrepreneurs. But she did latch quickly onto the idea of inserting special features about imperial court doings and dicta into the Beijing newspapers; readers dismissed them (as such inserts are dismissed today) as propaganda.

The flamboyant show that Cixi made of trivial and ineffective ‘modernisation’ was satirised by
the Qing scholar and official Jinliang, who described her hugely expensive attempts to string up electric lighting in the Forbidden City as providing barely more illumination than a few kerosene lamps, and mocked the fuss made over the explosion of her motion picture projector in 1904 by comparing it to the explosion the next year of a bomb planted by terrorists at the Beijing railway station. Cixi installed a bit of rail track in Beijing but forbade her carriage to be pulled by a steam engine; eunuchs had to do it instead. Her contemporaries outside the few thousand square yards of the Imperial City did not construe her interest in novelties or her agreement that the imperial seal should adorn policy documents as meaning she was a reformer, let alone a moderniser.

There was, however, one point on which the powerful men leading China in the 1890s were in agreement with Cixi. They all opposed an assumption of personal rule by the young Guangxu emperor. By the time Japan defeated the Qing army and navy in 1895 and compelled the empire to cede huge cash indemnities as well as the island of Taiwan, an increasingly vocal movement of nationalist intellectuals had fixed on the Guangxu emperor as the cynosure of a China revival – an aspiration modelled directly on the role of the young emperor Mutsuhito in Japan’s brilliant Meiji Restoration of 1868. The movement advocated ‘self-strengthening’ in industry and the military, reforms in government expenditure, investment in agriculture and education (for men and women), constitutional monarchy with a representative legislature, and the abolition of footbinding. Chang attributes all these initiatives to Cixi.

The movement’s emerging leaders, such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei (who was called ‘Wild Fox Kang’ as a young man because of his philosophical methods, though Chang inexplicably belittles him by giving him this name throughout), were quickly identified by the emperor as the best advisers and high ministers for the government he had hoped for years to create. In 1898 he worked with them and their sympathisers to devise a paper revolution, now called the Hundred Days Reform, which would have made him head of government. As Chang tells it, the reform party got themselves an army by enlisting Yuan Shikai to their cause, then plotted to kill Cixi. But Yuan Shikai told her of the plot and despite her ‘affectionate enthusiasm’ for the emperor’s plans up to that point, Cixi now had no choice but to act forcefully. She attempted to arrest the leaders of the movement. Kang and Liang escaped to Japan (how, we do not know), but six others were caught and beheaded. The emperor was seized, and kept in confinement for the rest of his life.

The way Chang tells this part of the story illustrates the difference between her methods and those of a historian. Many of her sources are indirect, suggestive or just plain unreliable. That the reformers wanted Cixi dead (a common enough solution to power problems in the
horns' nest) is not at all implausible. There is good evidence, which Chang cites, to indicate that the notoriously erratic radical Tan Sitong (later arrested and beheaded) was eager to kill her himself. But the evidence against Kang comes from Yuan Shikai. In a footnote, Chang explains that historians have universally erred in supposing that Yuan exposed the plot to Cixi only after meeting at least three times with the emperor and his reformers. ‘This could not have been the case,’ she writes. ‘Any delay by him, on a matter of life and death for Cixi, would have been interpreted by her as hesitation and a lack of loyalty. He would never have been trusted again. The fact was that from this time General Yuan enjoyed unreserved trust from Cixi and a meteoric rise.’ But Yuan had already enjoyed a meteoric rise, owing to his role as Li Hongzhang’s Beiyang lieutenant: that is why the emperor and his reformers were eager to gain his support for the coup. Yuan took his time relaying the report to Cixi because he was weighing his options. Once he decided to back Cixi against the emperor, his reasons for telling her that Kang was plotting to kill her were transparent. There is no evidence that Yuan rushed to tell Cixi of the military preparations because of his loyalty to her or fear of her.

The emperor’s desire to assume personal rule threatened the Beiyang Intendancy no less than Cixi and her cronies. It was an intolerable prospect that decades of work drawing power away from Beijing and towards Tianjin could be reversed by an emperor who actually wanted to govern. Ronglu, a general usually seen as an ally of Cixi, was a traditional Manchu and held several high titles in the imperial government. But he was also a military moderniser and a colleague of Yuan in the increasingly formal Beiyang organisation. It was he who best embodied the coinciding interests, in this case, of the Beiyang Intendancy and Cixi, and it was he who arrested the reformers and the emperor. Cixi was pleased with the outcome, which does not prove that Ronglu or Yuan were working for her or dependent on her favour. It was she who benefited from the fact that for the rest of her life it would always be a Beiyang desideratum that the emperor not assume rule. Yet as Chang tells it, Cixi raised up and carefully monitored men like Yuan Shikai, Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong, deciding on their titles, their assignments and even whether or not to punish them for various infractions.

When ambitious young men of the 1890s such as Sun Yatsen sought opportunities for influence, they did not approach the imperial government. They applied to the Beiyang Intendancy. When foreign powers wanted to engage in diplomacy with the Qing Empire, they did not, after the 1870s, go to the imperial court. They went to Li Hongzhang, although Li usually insisted on a gesture of some kind from the court legitimating his signature. It was Li or his successors who signed protocols, approved loans, initiated educational exchanges and new universities, and contracted for new rail and telegraph lines. Cixi often followed with pale
iterations, as when she opened the Imperial University in Beijing in 1898, three years after Li Hongzhang opened Beiyang University in Tianjin. Neither was she an energetic champion of constitutionalism; she did little more than agree, under pressure, to endorse petitions for constitutional development written in the provinces with the guidance of Zhang Zhidong and other reformist governors.

In June 1900, mobs from the countryside in northern China moved towards Beijing, wrecking foreign installations and killing Chinese Christians as they went. At one time Cixi was seen as a bloodthirsty ‘she-dragon’ shrilly exhorting the Boxers to murder and mayhem, but most modern histories of the Boxer Uprising make little mention of her. Today the origins of the uprising are traced to foreign incursions into China’s economy and culture; the specific provocations of the missionary presence and intrusions of foreign railways into Chinese farmland; immiseration in northern China; and popular impatience with the power structures of the Qing Empire.

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Cixi’s one overt act as head of state was to declare war on a consortium of foreign powers as the Boxer Uprising neared its climax. Chang grants the declaration precisely two sentences. Everyone – the emperor, the princes and any official who was asked his opinion – opposed Cixi’s plan to declare war against any nation sending troops into China. Chang depicts all Cixi’s opponents as defective in some way: cowardly, corrupt or in actual collusion with one or another of the foreign powers. Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong, along with their associates, are described as being in the employ of Russia and Germany respectively. Two officials who unwisely entered the hornets’ nest to advise Cixi against direct confrontation with foreign armies were beheaded before Li or Zhang could intervene; their heads were displayed as emblems of Cixi’s privilege. Chang says that both victims were spies, a claim for which there is no convincing evidence; Cixi’s stated reasons for executing them were that they were impertinent.

In known history as distinct from Chang’s Cixi-centred fancies, Li and Zhang agreed as soon as they received Cixi’s declaration of war that it was null and void. Not only was there no war, they told their subordinates, but further communications from Cixi – whom they now saw as dangerously out of touch with reality – should be ignored. The instruction marked the crossing of a psychological threshold for them: it was the end of the Beiyang credo that the authority of the court, however groundless, should be observed. And there was no war. Yet according to Chang, having disposed of the opposition, Cixi was free to prosecute ‘her war’.
She suggests that an actual war ensued, complete with a general, a front and troops. When the Shanxi governor, Yuxian, executed dozens of British and American missionaries, she writes, Cixi deposed the governor and replaced him with Yuan Shikai; the full array of historical evidence indicates that Ronglu made the decision. Only when Cixi’s campaign collapsed under the combined weight of the eight most powerful armies in the world did she capitulate.

By the end of August 1900 the forces of Britain, France, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, Japan and the United States had occupied Beijing. They squabbled over the territories they would like to appropriate in Manchuria and northern China and drew up various indemnities and policy demands they intended to impose on the Qing government for failing to protect foreign life and property. By then Cixi was out in the provincial capital of Xi’an, two weeks away from Beijing by caravan and well off the map of foreign territorial ambitions. With her were the Guangxu emperor and some of his concubines (back in Beijing, Cixi had ordered one of them to be murdered as there was no seat for her in the conveyance and she was slow to commit suicide).

Once the Boxers had been subdued, the foreign forces compiled a list of high-ranking Boxer supporters they intended to execute or put on trial. Cixi was on it, but only until Zhang Zhidong explained to the occupation authorities that Cixi’s role had been of no consequence, that her commands had been ignored, and that her opinions resulted from her general ignorance of the world outside the Forbidden City. The occupiers eventually agreed to allow Cixi and the emperor to return to Beijing, where they were welcomed by a kneeling Zhang Zhidong. Chang sees not the ritual propriety of a man towering over Cixi in power and significance, but a courtier desperate to explain himself and regain some sliver of imperial favour.

Though improbable, Chang’s interpretations chime with the current popular depiction of Cixi as a fierce defender of China’s sovereignty, fighting off foreign powers while conniving traitors like Li Hongzhang and Zhang Zhidong temporise. If the book is banned in China – as Chang’s two other books, *Wild Swans* and *Mao: The Unknown Story* have been – it will not be because of theme or content. But readers should be wary of it as history. Chang has made impressive use of the rapidly expanding range of published material from the imperial archives. But understanding these sources requires profound study of the context. Chang provides a long bibliography, including very recent studies in Chinese, but a large number of important works are absent – Joseph Esherick’s *Origins of the Boxer Uprising* and Luke Kwong’s *Mosaic of the Hundred Days* are just two egregious omissions. Her claims regarding
Cixi’s importance seem to be minted from her own musings, and have little to do with what we know was actually going in China. I am as eager as anyone to see more attention paid to women of historical significance. But rewriting Cixi as Catherine the Great or Margaret Thatcher is a poor bargain: the gain of an illusory icon at the expense of historical sense.