

Varying Depictions of Empress Dowager Cixi and the Connection to Identity: An Examination  
of Three Types of Sources

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The sense of justice shown by England in her protest against the murderous cruelty of that human vampire, the Dowager of China, should be followed by all civilized and Christian folk indorsing these lines: 'Rebellion to tyrants, obedience to God.' The tree of liberty only grows when watered by the blood of tyrants, and who more worthy of death than she who has connived at and urged on the murdering of our dear missionaries?<sup>1</sup>

The excerpt reprinted above was part of a *New York Times* letter to the editor printed in August 1903, written by Mrs. Williams Halsted Crane. It conveys her thoughts on the Empress Dowager of Qing-controlled China, Empress Dowager Cixi. The Qing Dynasty spanned from 1644 until 1912 and was a period when the country now known as China was ruled by the Qing, a minority ethnic group. At the very end of this period, from 1861 until 1908, Cixi held the role of Empress Dowager. Nothing in the historical record exists that details the identity or background of Mrs. Crane or her husband, however, it is not hard to glean her perspective from the quote. She referred to the Empress Dowager as a cruel woman, indeed a 'human vampire,' that was responsible for the death of Christian missionaries in China. While this description may sound harsh, it was similar to many other depictions of the Empress Dowager. She was repeatedly described as conniving, vindictive, a usurper, violent, vain and responsible for the collapse of the Qing dynasty, which directly preceded the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. The negative depiction was especially persistent in western newspapers during the early twentieth century but has subsequently trickled down to modern historical scholarship, in which she is still depicted as a dangerous, unstable and unqualified woman. Despite these frequent negative descriptions, many accounts described the Empress Dowager as a successful, intelligent, dedicated, kind, ambitious, and generous woman. After all, she must have been doing something right as she held the role of Empress Dowager for a period of nearly fifty years. The positive descriptions of the Empress Dowager largely derived from those who had direct contact

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs. William Halsted Crane, "Career of Chinese Dowager Empress," *New York Times*, Aug. 8, 1903, 6.

with her during her reign or those who have thought to question dominant narratives about her. A natural question arises: why was this the case and why was Empress Dowager Cixi depicted in such different ways in the sources that have been written about her? This paper will argue that these depictions of the Empress Dowager relied on her various identities to frame her in a certain way, namely the identities of Chinese, Manchu, and female, which all intersect and overlap simultaneously. There were stereotypes about each of these identities in both Chinese and western culture, and the Empress Dowager was framed in reference to them. For example, the depiction of Empress Dowager from the perspective of the wife of an American diplomat in China, who would likely view her as a woman and frame her accordingly, would be very different than a Chinese journalist, or even a historian of China, both of which would likely view her as a Manchu and make judgements based on that fact. To make this argument, I will examine three different types of sources: newspaper articles, the works of Der Ling, who worked and lived in the Forbidden City for a period of time, and historical scholarship. Before looking at the first of these sources, it is necessary to understand who exactly Empress Dowager was and what role she had in Chinese society and politics.

The woman who was to become Empress Dowager was born in 1835. History disagrees on her birth name and she is typically referred to using three different names: Yehe Nara, Lan Er, or Tz'u Hsi. For clarity, I will refer to her as Cixi, which is the pinyin version of her name, or the Empress Dowager. Cixi was born in Beijing to a minor Manchu family and was raised in several different Chinese cities due to her father's job as a government official. In 1851, when Cixi was only sixteen years old, she was selected for a highly coveted position: a concubine in the Chinese Imperial Court. This selection was an upgrade in her social status, but there was no guarantee of power or prestige simply because one was a concubine, as "if the emperor was never interested

in her, she would live alone forever, until death released her from ‘solitary confinement.’”<sup>2</sup>

However, through clever seduction on Cixi’s part, she was able to rise from the status of a low-ranking concubine to the favored concubine of the Xianfeng Emperor, who named her as the Imperial Concubine. In 1856, Cixi moved even further up the ranks when she became pregnant and delivered a son. This child was the only son of the Emperor and was thus next in line to the throne. The Xianfeng Emperor died in 1861 and Cixi’s son was elevated to the position of Emperor, officially becoming the Tongzhi Emperor. This made Cixi a co-Empress Dowager along with the Xianfeng Emperor’s wife. As the Tongzhi Emperor was only five years old, the two Empress Dowagers effectively ruled China for many years. However, in 1872, the Tongzhi Emperor turned seventeen, the age of manhood, and it was decided that the two Empress Dowagers were no longer necessary. Empress Dowager Cixi was forced to vacate her position, though she believed that the Emperor should “continue consulting her on important matters, since, as she said, it would take time for him to develop the necessary experience and judgment.”<sup>3</sup> This interference alienated her son and their relationship continued to deteriorate, resulting in the effective removal of the Empress Dowager from any form of power. Cixi’s luck changed however when her son fell ill and soon died. The process of succession began and, as tradition mandated, “the successor should be chosen from the next generation: an adopted son of the present Emperor.”<sup>4</sup> However, if this were to take place, the Empress Dowager would lose all of her power with finality, so she decided to make her own plan: the Empress Dowager’s sister had married a member of the royal family and “they had a son who was only four years old...

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<sup>2</sup> X.L. Woo, *Empress Dowager Cixi: China’s Last Dynasty and the Long Reign of a Formidable Concubine* (New York, NY: Algora Publishing, 2002), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Woo, 132.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

[thus the] Empress Dowager could stay in power, now, on the same pretext as before.”<sup>5</sup> While historians and scholars largely view this tactic as having been illegal, in the nineteenth century, it was accepted that the royal family had control over heirs and the process of succession. Her plan was successful, and her nephew was named Emperor Guangxu in early 1875. This allowed Empress Dowager Cixi, along with her co-Empress Dowager, another shot at ruling the country, which remained viable for another decade. In 1881, her co-Empress Dowager died and Cixi gained full control of China for the first time. This state of affairs continued until 1889, when Cixi finally gave up control of the country to her nephew, the Guangxu Emperor, although she retained a certain amount of emotional control over the young man. However, as had happened before, Empress Dowager Cixi’s luck changed and this removal from power did not last, as she retook control of China in 1898. The sources, some primary and some secondary, differ in their accounts of her return to power. Some declare that the Empress Dowager returned to power peacefully, whereas others assert that it was accomplished via a coup. Regardless of the means, the Empress Dowager did regain control of China and would remain in control for the rest of her life. Nominally, she co-ruled with the Emperor during this time but she effectively had full control. It is easy to see that Empress Dowager Cixi’s life was a complicated one, with many twists and turns. The only constant was her desire for power, which was a quality of the Empress that was demonized by some of the very sources I will discuss.<sup>6</sup>

Newspaper articles offer perhaps the most insight into the depictions of the Empress Dowager from a foreign audience. There is an abundance of foreign newspapers with articles that featured the Empress Dowager, of which I will look at two: the *New York Times* and the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Uglow, “Tz’u-hsi, [Hsiao-ch’in],” in *The Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Women’s Biography*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. Jennifer S. Uglow, Frances Hinton, and Maggy Hendry (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishers, 2005).

*Washington Post*. Due to archival gaps and a language barrier, I could only focus on one Chinese newspaper, *The North-China Herald*. This newspaper did not provide a distinctly Chinese depiction of current events, as it was edited and owned by Europeans, but it is different from the American ones, because it was published in China and often translated and published articles from Chinese daily newspapers.<sup>7</sup> In newspaper articles, the Empress Dowager was often depicted as power-hungry and the diction used to describe her corresponds with this narrative. For example, a *Washington Post* article from October 14, 1900, had the title “Real Empress Dowager: Greatest Tyrant in the World and Is Quick in Thought and Action.” The body of this article referred to her as “the greatest tyrant in the world and the strongest female character on any throne” and as “extravagant beyond expression.”<sup>8</sup> Her position as a tyrant was secured due to the control of the Emperor and her effective rule of the country. The title of the article also refers to her intelligence and quick thought, although these traditionally positive attributes were used to frame the Empress Dowager as cunning and manipulative, using her smarts to get what she wants. The negative characteristics of violence, manipulation, and tyranny were continuously repeated in newspapers. In one *New York Times* article, she was said to be on a “reign of terror” and in another, she was described with a despotic tone, like when the Empress Dowager, with her “harsh and cruel face,” allowed the Emperor to be “taken out of his prison for the day, so that

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<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this investigation, I will look at English-language newspapers based in the United States and China. Specifically, I will look at articles in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*. In terms of the United States, there were four newspapers that captured the majority of readership: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. However, the *Boston Globe* and the *Saturday Evening Post* do not have accessible newspaper archives for the time period that I am investigating, so I am not able to look at them. In terms of Chinese newspapers, there were very few that published either solely in English or had an English-language edition. Of this small number, even fewer have been digitized so I am left with only one accessible Chinese newspaper.

<sup>8</sup> L.T. Headland, “Real Empress Dowager: Greatest Tyrant in the World and Is Quick in Thought and Action,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 14, 1900, 30.

we might tell everybody that his mother had not yet killed him.”<sup>9</sup> This statement represented a theatrical exaggeration but nonetheless describes how the Emperor was confined to the Forbidden City. The *North-China Herald* was just as negative towards the Empress Dowager, with one article referring to her as a “reactionary Manchu,” a “usurper,” and as having committed a coup targeted at the Emperor’s legitimate government.<sup>10</sup> Not all portrayals of the Empress Dowager were negative although this was less common. For example, one journalist talked about a time when her face “became instantly suffused with smiles, her eyes became soft and benevolent and she was all kindness and motherly solicitude for her Imperial nephew.”<sup>11</sup> There was also an instance where she was praised for “her interest in education and commercial intercourse with foreign nations, which was paving the way for better missionary work,” although this might not have been positive feedback for the Empress Dowager as much as it was praise for her perceived opening of relations with western businesses.<sup>12</sup> The positive feedback for the Empress Dowager was often interspersed with negative descriptions, offering a conflicting picture of her as good and bad. This is the case in one *New York Times* article in which “she is generally allowed to be an exceedingly clever and astute woman,” while three lines before it is written that “of course, she is swindled and humbugged right and left by her army of understrappers.”<sup>13</sup> This depiction of her was both positive and condescending at the same time. While the author is not writing about Cixi as a despotic usurper, he does seemingly diminish her actual role in daily governmental affairs. This contradicted the one thing about the Empress

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<sup>9</sup> “Reign of Terror in China,” *New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1898, 1.; “The Empress Dowager of China,” *New York Times*, Sep. 22, 1901, 23.

<sup>10</sup> “The Empress Dowager,” *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, May 2, 1900, 765.

<sup>11</sup> “The Unfortunate Emperor,” *The North-China Herald and Supreme Court & Consular Gazette*, Mar. 14, 1900, 473.

<sup>12</sup> “Baptists Discuss Missions: Empress Dowager of China Praised for Encouraging Education and Commerce with Foreign Nations,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 21, 1906, 12.

<sup>13</sup> The Empress Dowager of China, *New York Times*, Dec. 26, 1894, 5.

Dowager that nearly everyone can agree on: that she was firmly in control of her court, the Emperor, and Imperial China.

The perspective of Der Ling provides a necessary and apt comparison to the newspaper articles discussed above. Der Ling was the daughter of a “diplomat who served as a minister of the Qing government to Japan, England, and France in the last decade of the nineteenth century.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, she lived in cosmopolitan cities all around the world and was highly educated, learning several foreign languages including English. When her father was recalled back to Beijing in 1903, Der Ling became a lady in waiting for the Empress Dowager. Cixi specifically wanted Der Ling for her knowledge of European culture and languages. When she began to meet with foreign representatives and their wives, “[she] fe[lt] it necessary to find someone to help her with translation as well as introduce her to Western customs.”<sup>15</sup> Contrary to many of her depictions, Cixi was interested in European and western culture, inasmuch as this knowledge would increase her standing and importance among the foreigners. Der Ling held her position inside the Forbidden City for two years and later wrote a book about her experiences, aptly titled *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, and published in 1911. The book details her daily activities and responsibilities during her time in the Palace, which means that it consisted more of descriptions of the physical characteristics of her life, including the Palace, the Empress Dowager, and the Emperor. Nevertheless, Der Ling managed to infuse her thoughts into the narrative. One secondary analysis of *Two Years in the Forbidden City* posits that Der Ling viewed the Empress Dowager as “a charming infant spoiled by endless but circumscribed

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<sup>14</sup> Shuo Wang, “Der Ling: Manchu Princess, Cultural Advisor, and Author,” in *The Human Tradition in Modern China*, ed. Kenneth Hammond and Kristin Stapleton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 73.

<sup>15</sup> Wang, 82.



luxury.”<sup>16</sup> While this may be a tad harsh, much of the book depicted the material advantages of the Empress Dowager, such as intricate outfits, jewelry, and grandiose palaces. Cixi seemed to take for granted her immense privilege, which likely contributed to many of the negative feelings that ordinary people had about her. Der Ling, however, mostly focused on the positive aspects of the Empress Dowager and her life in the palace. She wrote that “life was perfectly lovely at the Palace. Her Majesty was always nice and kind.”<sup>17</sup> She repeatedly emphasizes the intelligence of the Empress Dowager and discusses how she was shrewdly aware of the ambitions and motives of both the eunuchs that served her and the ladies that were part of the court. Der Ling also referenced Katherine Carl, the American artist who painted a portrait of the Empress Dowager for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition. Carl earned a unique place in history as the only westerner to ever live in the court of Imperial China, which she did for nine months. In reflecting on her own experiences, Carl was complementary of the Empress Dowager, writing: “I found her a charming woman, ever fascinating and elusive... always thoughtful and considerate... a womanly woman full of intelligence and charm.”<sup>18</sup> These two narratives, given by people who intimately knew the Empress Dowager, differed greatly from those who made judgements based on the testimony of others or based on gendered, racial or class prejudices.

One might expect, or at least hope, that historical scholarship centering around Empress Dowager Cixi might seek to be more objective on the subject, limiting any exaltation or unnecessary judgement. However, as Sue Chung puts it: “Clio, the Muse of History, has not been kind to the Empress Dowager Tz’u-hsi [Cixi].”<sup>19</sup> One of the first historical sources published

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<sup>16</sup> Grant Hayter-Menzies, *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 176.

<sup>17</sup> Der Ling, *Two years in the Forbidden City* (Hong Kong: Independent Publishers Group, 2007), 99.

<sup>18</sup> Katherine Carl, “A Personal Estimate of the Character of the Late Empress Dowager, Tze-Hsi,” *The Journal of Race Development* 4, no. 1 (Jul. 1913), 58.

<sup>19</sup> Sue Chung, “The Much Maligned Empress Dowager: A Revisionist Study of the Empress Dowager Tz’u-hsi (1835-1908),” *Modern Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1979), 177.

about the Empress Dowager was entitled *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzū Hsi*. This book was published in 1910, only two years after the death of the Empress Dowager and works to tell her life story. It includes the diary entries an Imperial Palace worker, who wrote extensively about Cixi and life in the royal court. Initially, this work seemed to be a promising and useful historical account. However, it was discovered in the 1970s that the author of this work forged the diary he based his account on, and thus the work was not historically valid. While the lack of historical integrity is harmful in itself, the book has had an outsized influence on Chinese historical scholarship and “is the book which has shaped many of our present-day negative images of Tz’u-hsi.”<sup>20</sup> *China Under the Empress Dowager* was ultimately somewhat positive in its interpretation of the Empress Dowager, writing that “[Cixi] was simply a woman of unusual courage and vitality, or strong will and unbounded ambition...living out her life... in accordance with the traditions of her race and caste.”<sup>21</sup> Despite this endorsement, western audiences generally took the book as a condemnation of the Empress Dowager, because it included diction with negative connotations like ‘coup’ and ‘cunning.’<sup>22</sup> Many history texts have followed the example of *China Under the Empress Dowager* and have continued to write about the Empress Dowager in uniformly negative terms. For example, *The History of China, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* was written by David Wright in 2011 and Wright refers to Empress Dowager Cixi as “a cunning and ruthless woman who had been the real power behind the Qing throne since 1862,” as the person who “led to catastrophe for China,” and casually claims that Cixi may have murdered her nephew.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Morris Rossabi wrote in a Chinese history

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<sup>20</sup> Chung, “The Much Maligned,” 178.

<sup>21</sup> J.O.P. Bland and E. Backhouse, *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzū Hsi* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1910), 479.

<sup>22</sup> Bland, ix.

<sup>23</sup> David Wright, *The History of China, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2011), 116, 283, 284.

textbook that “Cixi was principally interested in securing and retaining power.”<sup>24</sup> While they were published over a century later, these two modern history texts do not substantially differ in their depiction of the Empress Dowager from *China Under the Empress Dowager*. New revisionist scholarship, however, challenges the dominant narrative that Cixi was a manipulative usurper who tanked China. In “The Much Maligned Empress Dowager: A Revisionist Study of the Empress Dowager Tz’u-hsi (1835-1908),” Sue Chung examines the origins of Cixi’s negative reputation. Chung makes the argument that propaganda, on the part of revolutionaries who wanted a change in the Chinese government, contributed to the negative understanding of Cixi and her actions. During the struggle over the 1898 reforms, those advocating for reform had an interest in framing the Chinese Imperial government as chaotic and archaic, thus leading both Chinese citizens and western observers to favor a more democratic style of government. To cause this chaos, a rift, either real or imagined, was necessary between the Emperor and the Empress Dowager. While “the image of a hapless Emperor at this time does not seem to be an accurate perception,” the reformers began to circulate this story “by spreading stories against the Empress Dowager.”<sup>25</sup> The story that these revolutionaries weaved, specifically Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, was one of a coup d’état, in which the overbearing and manipulative Empress Dowager forcefully seized power from the Emperor and locked him in the Forbidden City. This story was quickly picked up by the British, and “while some Britishers... doubted this interpretation, many Chinese and foreigners accepted the idea that the coup d’état was... a power struggle between the Empress Dowager and the Emperor.”<sup>26</sup> The narrative of a coup spread and eventually became reified as accepted truth. Many of the sources that historians reference in

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<sup>24</sup> Morris Rossabi, *History of China* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2013), 315.

<sup>25</sup> Chung, “The Much Maligned,” 181.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 182.

writing about this time period originate from the same revolutionaries mentioned above. Chung writes that “historians have long relied upon the works of men such as K’ang Yu-wei and Liang Ch’i-ch’ao [Qichao]... for their information about the workings of the Ch’ing court... [and] their prejudice is reflected in their writings about the court at the time.”<sup>27</sup> The visible agenda of these men, combined with the propaganda used against the Empress Dowager, calls into question if any of the historical accounts, by both Chinese scholars or western ones, are truthful.

As was addressed above, the depictions of Empress Dowager varied widely depending on the person who produced it and the method of publication. Both in her time and in ours, she continues to be dually depicted as a smart woman who took advantage of her situation and as a manipulative, narcissistic woman who used her power to usurp and harm others. I believe identity plays the largest role in the divergence of the sources, both the identity of the writer and the identity that they associated with the Empress Dowager. Three identities play a role here: Chinese, Manchu, and woman. The broadest of these is Chinese, which colored the impression of westerners and foreigners primarily. There has been a long history of animosity between the Chinese and foreigners, dating from the outbreak of the Opium Wars in 1839 and the subsequent secession of Chinese territory in 1842. Neither Chinese officials nor Chinese citizens trusted westerners, nor particularly liked them, elucidated by Der Ling when she wrote that “the foreigners of those days were insufferable, ...desirous of remaking China according to their own standards.”<sup>28</sup> This resentment led to strained relations and misconceptions from both groups. A tangential divide centered on religion, which occupied much foreign attention. As was mentioned in the opening quote, western foreigners believed that the Imperial Chinese government actively plotted to kill Christian missionaries, an impression fueled by the Boxer Rebellion, which

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Der Ling, *Old Buddha* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1939), 233.

coincided with the final years of Cixi's rule and involved a Chinese-led fight to expel foreigners from the country. Most of these foreigners were Christian missionaries and western Christians believed that "the emperor and his court were unanimously in support of collaboration with Boxers to rid China of foreigners and Christians."<sup>29</sup> The court position was not in fact unanimous, but the Empress Dowager did fully support the Boxers and the expulsion of foreigners from China. Her identity as Chinese, and even worse as anti-western Chinese, likely led to much of the negative coverage that she received in western newspapers.

The next aspect of the Empress Dowager's identity that affected her negative depiction was her Manchu identity. While the Han were overwhelmingly the largest ethnic group in China at the time, the Manchu ruled the Empire during the Qing Dynasty, which ended in 1912 upon the establishment of the Republic of China. There has long been a documented hostility between the Manchus and the Han. This hostility was especially intense in the later years of Empress Dowager Cixi's reign. In 1903, Zou Rong, a Chinese nationalist, published a book titled *The Revolutionary Army* and wrote: "Unjust! What is most unjust and bitter in China today is to have to bear with the wolfish ambitions of this inferior race of nomads, the brigand Manchus, our rulers."<sup>30</sup> Zou does not go to any lengths to hide his animosity towards the Manchu race and in particular, the Manchus that are governing the country. This opinion was not uncommon as after the failure of the 1898 reform movement "the erstwhile reformers of 1898 placed most of the blame for their failure upon the Manchus" and Liang Qichao allegedly said "that he would rather hand the empire over to 'neighboring friends' than let it be seized by 'household slaves.'"<sup>31</sup> After

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<sup>29</sup> Anthony Clark, "Local Magistrates and Foreign Mendicants: Chinese Views of Shanxi's Franciscan Mission during the Late Qing," in *Reshaping the Boundaries: The Christian Intersection of China and the West in the Modern Era*, ed. Song Gang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 99.

<sup>30</sup> Rong Zou, *The Revolutionary Army: A Chinese Nationalist Tract of 1903* (Boston, MA: De Gruyter Mouton, 2017), 65.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Rhoads, *Manchus and Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2000), 70.

reading such rhetoric, it is no surprise that the Manchu Empress Dowager was often disparaged by newspapers and other public accounts in China and would continuously be maligned in historical scholarship for the next century.

The last aspect of identity that defined Empress Dowager Cixi, perhaps more so than any other, was gender. Women in China were considered “in some way unsuited to the arts of statecraft, or at least unfit for formal political office,” and if they did hold a politically important role, they had a “‘bad’ influence... on political matters.”<sup>32</sup> This type of thinking, which had been traditional in ancient and early-modern China, made a comeback under the Qing dynasty: “Under the reestablished orthodox Confucian teaching, the concept of women as co-equals no longer existed. Women were not equal.”<sup>33</sup> Due to these preconceptions, it was taboo and socially unacceptable for Cixi to wield the amount of power that she did. She was “a complex but decisive woman (unlike the stereotype of a typical female in traditional China) ... Chinese sources often portray her as unscrupulous and vindictive in her rise to power... They also revile her policies and depict her as a major stumbling block to the reforms needed for modernization.”<sup>34</sup> Empress Dowager Cixi was one of the few powerful Chinese women of the time and was thus framed as a bad leader, immoral woman, and vindictive ruler. Due to her gender, the Empress Dowager was judged by different standards than other rulers of China. In her biography of the Empress Dowager, Jung Chang echoes this sentiment when she writes: “Compared to that of her predecessors, or successors, Cixi’s rule was benign. In some four decades of absolute power, her political killings... where no more than a few dozen, many of

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<sup>32</sup> Leslie Collins, “The New Women: A Psychohistorical Study of the Chinese Feminist Movement from 1900 to the Present” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1976), 108.

<sup>33</sup> Collins, 110.

<sup>34</sup> Rossabi, 315.

them in response to plots to kill her.”<sup>35</sup> Even when compared with the violence of the rulers and dynasties that preceded her and the unimaginable violence that would occur in China following her rule, Empress Dowager Cixi was strongly disparaged in sources. Her gendered existence strongly contributed to this depiction. Der Ling once wrote that ““Her majesty always wanted to be a man,” and her life as ruler would have been much easier had she been.”<sup>36</sup>

Empress Dowager Cixi was a complex woman who lived a legendary life. She rose from a low-ranking family to hold the most important position in the Empire. She was a powerful, ambitious and determined woman who often suffered judgement, both from foreigners and the Chinese, because of these qualities. In western newspapers, Cixi was disparaged due to her unwillingness to cooperate with westerners, who she viewed as foreign imperialists. According to these newspapers and the foreigners that wrote them, she intentionally killed and sabotaged westerners, which, in their mind, meant that she hated Christians. Even though no evidence supported this view, it was repeated constantly in European and American newspapers. Der Ling, an imperial servant for the Empress Dowager, held a different view of her than the foreign newspapers. She viewed Empress Dowager Cixi as a smart and capable woman who was firmly in control of China. Unlike many foreigners who wrote about the Empress Dowager, Der Ling was intimately involved with Cixi and saw her actions first-hand. Der Ling viewed the fact that the Empress Dowager was a woman positively. In her view, Cixi served as a model leader, even if Der Ling did not completely agree with the Empress Dowager about everything. In contrast to Der Ling’s account, the historical interpretations of the Empress Dowager have not been kind and have continued to disparage her image throughout the twentieth century. Many historical

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<sup>35</sup> Jung Chung, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (New York, NY: Random House, 2013), 371.

<sup>36</sup> Hayter-Menzies, 136.

texts base their analysis on the Empress Dowager on western interpretations and judgements originally made during the British occupation of China, which lasted from 1842 until roughly 1900. In the past half-century, scholars have begun to question this narrative and examine the life of Empress Dowager Cixi more dispassionately. Depending on identity of the writer of the historical text, the Empress Dowager was judged based on the cultural and gendered expectations of three groups to which she belonged: the Chinese, the Manchus, and women. If another ruler without these characteristics took her place, they certainly would have been interpreted differently as a historical figure.



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