Book Review: Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China

Jung Chang’s 2013 release, now available as an e-book, reflects on one of modern China’s most influential figures.

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The Manchu Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) is generally thought of as a conservative figure in Chinese history, incapable of defending China’s interests in the second half of the 19th century, when China lost its position as the world’s largest economy.

Against this broad consensus stands Jung Chang’s lively biography, first published in 2013 and now available as an e-book, that depicts Cixi (pronounced “Tseshi”) as quite the opposite. Chang argues that Cixi, the most important woman in Chinese history, “brought a medieval empire into the modern age.” Under Cixi’s rule, China built its first railroads (the Beijing-Canton railroad remains a key artery in today’s economy), installed telegraphs, introduced electricity, steam boats, modern mining, and newspapers, established the state bank, and promoted freedom of religion.

The constitutional system Cixi initiated, Chang writes, included modern laws — commercial, civil, criminal, and judicial, and the establishment of law schools. In the early 20th century, she allowed women to appear in public, abolished foot binding, lifted the ban on Han-Manchu intermarriage, and decreed that girls should be educated. Indeed, Cixi is depicted as unusually wise for her time and age. The author writes that “instinctively she seems to have known that a government needs dissenting voices,” turning her into a sort of Chinese counterpart of India’s sage Mughal Emperor Akbar, who promoted religious tolerance during his long reign in the 16th and 17th century.

Contrary to her predecessor, Cixi believed that trade with the West would strengthen China. In a courageous move, she employed a large number of foreigners in the civil service to modernize the administrative structures. She also tried to introduce science into China’s school system, a move that required hiring Western teachers. She promoted Hsu Chi-she, the first scholar to argue that China was not the center of the world, but just one of many countries. Unprecedented in China, she urged her temporary successor, Emperor Guangxu, to learn English. All these reforms
took place against the resistance of a conservative establishment that continuously plotted against her and sought to remove foreigners from Chinese territory.

The book cites the diaries of the first Chinese officials who traveled to the West in the 19th century, the majority of whom were deeply impressed by democracy and the technological progress they saw. “If we are able to do what they are doing, there is no question that we, too, can be rich and strong,” one wrote. Cixi tried to use these accounts to convince China’s elite that change was necessary. It was under her that formal Chinese diplomacy emerged. Interestingly enough, an early diplomatic challenge — aside from the rise of Japan — was to help improve the conditions of Chinese slaves in Cuba and Peru.

Throughout the book, Chang’s admiration for Cixi strikes the reader as somewhat exaggerated. “Never small-minded, she would invariably focus on the bigger picture”, the author writes. Yet at the same time, the book described in detail how, after not feeling sufficiently revered, the Empress issued a decree that all her advisors would have to kneel in her presence — not exactly a sign of open-mindedness (even though she ended the practice later in her reign). When a palace eunuch made a remark that offended her, she had him strangled to death. When she discovered a plan to assassinate her, she not only had the plotters beheaded, but also two innocent bystanders, to avoid having the case turn public.

Chang may be right in her claim that Cixi was the first Chinese leader who embraced modernity and sought to learn from the West, yet one may also argue that there was little else the Empress could do. After all, it was under her that Western modernity was forced upon the Chinese, and she promoted adaptation only when she realized that continued isolation would have led to China’s disintegration. Japan, by comparison, embraced change much more whole-heartedly, and, as a consequence, was able to defeat China militarily later on, despite Japan’s vastly smaller size.

Chang’s strength — her remarkable capacity to turn a lot of historical information into a highly readable account, accessible to a wide readership — is also the book’s weakness. At times, her analysis suffers somewhat from an overly simplified style somewhat reminiscent of Isabel Allende’s tales, which depicts most individuals as either good or evil, with goodness always eventually rewarded. For example, Kang Youwei, a complex character and Cixi’s main rival, is depicted rather crudely as a power-hungry plotter, yet he had many good ideas about how to reform China.

Another problem is that the author depicts the West in an at times overly romanticized way. Chang reports how “one piece of information that made an impression on (the Empress) was that individual Chinese lives mattered to the Westerners.” That sits oddly with England’s ruthless promotion of the opium trade for commercial gain, which led the premature death of thousands of Chinese, and, decades later, with the bloody suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, thus assuring China’s continued inferior status in international society.

The Empress was, without a doubt, a remarkable woman, and this book makes an important contribution to correcting her image as a cold-hearted despot who wrecked China. Cixi’s influence was all the more remarkable because she did not, as a woman, have formal power, and she was not allowed to leave the Forbidden City during the early years of her reign. She was never the official ruler of China, thus always battling those who questioned her legitimacy. Chang surely has a point when she argues that Chinese historians were reluctant to elevate a woman to the pantheon of the country’s key reformers, and thus chose to highlight the negative aspects of her time in power.

As China is about to turn into the world’s largest economy, many commentators have recently pointed out that China occupied the leading spot as late as 1870s. While that may be true — largely due to the country’s massive population — Chang’s book is a reminder of how poor and underdeveloped Chinese society was at the time, especially when compared to Western Europe or the United States. Even at the turn of the century, 99 percent of China’s population was illiterate. Western military incursions met very little resistance, despite the fact that, contrary to India, China was a relatively centralized state. Even Cixi’s military modernization program — halted after incompetent Emperor Guangxu temporarily took over — was insufficient for China to stand up to European powers which geared up to World War I.

Even though the book at times reads like a hagiography, Chang’s book is a great contribution that makes Chinese history more accessible to the rest of the world, and one that corrects the way we think about Cixi’s legacy. That is good news considering the flood of books currently being written about contemporary China, many of which provide no historical perspective. It may also be useful to those interested in the future of Chinese foreign policy. None of the other great powers of present and past, like the United States, France, Russia and the United Kingdom, were ever forced to accept such harsh treaties like the ones imposed on China during the “century of humiliation,” leading to an inferiority complex the country was only able to shake off under Mao. These painful memories remain an important element of the way China relates to the rest of the world.

See The Diplomat’s interview with author Jung Chang, published shortly after the hardcover release of her book.
