



Empress Dowager Cixi: China's Last Dynasty and the Long Reign of a Formidable Concubine : Legends and Lives During the Declining Days of the Qing Dynasty

X. L. Woo

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The Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) brought destruction to the Qing Dynasty, the last feudal dynasty in the long history of China. Written with remarkable charm and verve, this book is a delightful exploration of the history of her extraordinary life and long reign, relating both historical facts and apocryphal anecdotes about her private affairs. How did she climb from the bottom rung of the ladder as an ordinary ambitious girl to the top rung of power as an empress dowager? How did she grow from an inexperienced girl to a mature politician who managed to maintain her sovereign status for 48 years?

In all the history of China, only two women ever conquered and held the heights of power. Both enjoyed long reigns characterized by ruthless intrigue; they maintained an iron grip at the center while the vast country was torn by rebellions and caught up in foreign wars. Through their policy decisions as well as their personal foibles, both left a deep imprint in history and in the minds of the Chinese people, fueling literature and legend.

Fighting to maintain her power base, Empress Cixi struggled with the need to modernize the painfully backward empire she had inherited while honoring age-old traditions. She studied previous rulers' failures and achievements, and especially followed the example of Wu-Hou, who had elevated herself from concubine to empress some 1200 years earlier, showing that a woman could be a successful ruler.

The stories that follow, some legendary, offer a glimpse of life during the declining days of the last Chinese dynasty. Popular rebellions, foreign wars, devastating floods and drought-induced famines killed tens of millions in the 19th century. Cixi learned her lessons well. She fended off every adversary, prolonging her reign for 48 years. But all her craft and guile were not enough to repair the internal divisions and preserve traditional China against the onslaught of modernity, of Europe, and of her Asian neighbors.

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