

PREMIER ISSUE

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*Cover Story:*  
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The Dowager  
Empress of China





# The Double Dowagers or the Emperor has Two Mothers

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Concubine Yehenara,  
later Tsu Hsi (Cixi)

In 1861 Imperial China was in chaos. Foreign armies were invading. The Manchu Emperor Hsien-feng (Xianfeng) was dying. He and the court had fled north to refuge in Manchuria. His empress Tzu An had born him no sons. If the Emperor died without an heir, the Ch'ing (Qing)\* dynasty would fly apart. In the winter of 1862 the Emperor died.

Back in 1856 one of his second wives, or concubines, had born him a son! She is known to history as Yehenara. At the last moment, Yehenara, seeing the significance of her situation, forced the dying Emperor to recognize her son as the heir. He did so with his dying breath, and he announced Yehenara as regent for the boy.

However, there was a group of reactionary warmongers, including the dead Emperor's younger brother Prince Chun (Yixuan), who were preparing to seize the baby emperor so they could control the government. They also planned to do away with Yehenara!

Their plan was foiled when Prince Kung (Gong), the middle brother, and the smartest of all the line of imperial brothers, arranged to hurry the widow and little Tung Chih back to Beijing. The funeral procession bearing the body of the Emperor would shortly follow. Time was of the essence. Kung quickly gathered support for Tung Chih and his mother Yehenara.

**\*Two Names for Many Historical Figures**  
There are two systems for writing Chinese names to English: "Wade-Giles" and the newer "pinyin" shown in parenthesis ().

The imperial council was pressured into declaring Yehenara and Tzu An Co-Dowager Empresses as well as co-mothers of five-year-old Tung Chih! They had gained control of the imperial seals before leaving Manchuria, so the coup d'état had an air of legality.

When the reactionaries (referred to as the "Iron Hats") arrived for the funeral, they were confronted by a fait accompli. At the direction of the wily Prince Kung, the Dowagers issued a decree condemning the Iron Hats for attempting treason by going against the will of the dead emperor. With exception of the weak-willed Prince Chun (Yixuan), the ringleaders were all executed within hours of the decree accusing them. Prince Chun was easily bullied into complete cooperation with the Dowagers and Prince Kung. The Dowagers, by the way, were also now joint regents of their "mutual" son Tung Chih.

Prince Kung was to remain the principal manipulator of the central government for many years: he had the support of General Jung Lu (Ronglu), a close friend of Yehenara, now Tzu Hsi (Cixi). Furthermore, he had the assistance of the insidious Li Hung Chang (Li Hongzhang). Li was to become the major figure pulling the strings behind the scenes of the Manchu court for decades to come. The foreigners loved him, by the way!

The idea that the former concubine Tzu Hsi was controlling the affairs of state is, of course, a myth created by British and American journalists. She sold many more newspapers as a monster. We now know that she and her sister Dowager Tzu An were little more than pawns in the vast scheme of things.

Emperor Hsien-feng  
(Xianfeng)



Empress  
Tzu An

Prince Kung



Baron Jung-Lu  
(Ronglu)



Tung Chih  
aka Tongzhi Emperor



Li Hung-Chang



While it is true that Tzu Hsi and Tzu An managed to get along most of the time, there is an understanding that there were many contentious moments over the young emperor Tung Chih. One rumor claims that Tzu Hsi played the disciplinarian and occasional punisher, and little Tung Chih would run to his “other” mother Tzu An, who would comfort him and spoil him with treats. Even this lacks credibility, because Prince Kung was the primary dictator of the Emperor’s education and upbringing, not the Dowagers.

As Tung Chih grew to his teenage years, he became a willful degenerate just like his father. The Dowagers had to step aside when Tung Chih became sixteen. However, they did help select a wife for him. In 1875, his weakened physique succumbed to disease and he died – apparently childless.

Tzu Hsi was always the more assertive of the two Empress Dowagers. With the death of her emperor son, she now promoted the succession of her own nephew, Prince Kung and the council agreed to this, and the two dowagers were again Co-Dowagers, Co-Mothers, and Co-Regents.

The nephew was just three years old. Tzu Hsi thus embarked on her second regency. Tzu An was likely bullied into cooperation, as she usually went along with Prince Kung and Tzu Hsi.

It should be pointed out that at the beginning of their joint rule, the Dowagers were given equally lavish apartments in all royal residences, equal servants, honors and incomes to go with it! Tzu An was never belittled or pushed aside. Regardless of how they felt about each other, they always manifested

an air of mutual respect and courtesy. When Tzu An died in 1881, she was accorded all the honors due her – and Tzu Hsi wept, suitably.

All through the 1870s, 80s and 90s, the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi gradually became the more assertive of the two women. She was pushed forward by Prince Kung, and later by Li Hung Chang. The public came to see her as their ruler, even though she was acting as regent for the actual ruler, the Emperor.

When her nephew came of age as the Kuang Hsu aka, Guangxu Emperor, Tzu Hsi continued to be the central figure at the Manchu court.

The real controllers of China's destiny in this era were the European Powers. Li Hung Chang was the negotiator-in-chief between Beijing and the foreigners. While he was telling the Empress Dowager of his undying loyalty to the Manchus, he was allowing the foreign press to believe the very worst of her.

### By the time of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, Tzu Hsi was perceived an absolute monster by the western press

Although the perception was false, she indeed did loath the Europeans and Christians for understandable reason. The only exposure she had to westerners was of foreign armies raping, pillaging and destroying everything they could get their hands on in China. What else could she think?

By the time of her death in 1908, Tzu Hsi had named the child Puyi, son of Prince Chun as Xuantong Emperor, and the last emperor of imperial China.

At the end, public opinion in the west had changed somewhat. The Chinese subjects of the Manchus were calling her “Old Buddha,” and looked upon her as their ruler. During the last decade of her life, Tzu Hsi had done her utmost to change the miserable image she had been given by western reporters around 1900.

Nevertheless, it is only in our time that the truth of her life and times has been told with any accuracy. The real story is every bit as thrilling and dramatic as the sordid tales of yesteryear. The Dowager Empress of China has become an icon for all time to come.

- G. S. Stuart

<http://www.galleryhistoricalfigures.com>



Empress Dowager  
Tzu Hsi aka. Cixi



PuYi aka. Xuantong Emperor



Kuang Hsu aka.  
Guangxu Emperor