

Student Name and Student Number

Professor's Name

Course Name A History of International Politics (Oriental)

Submission Date

What kind of impact did Empress Dowager Cixi's policies have on Qing China?

One of the most illustrious figures in Chinese history, is undoubtedly Empress Dowager Cixi. In this paper, I will show what a considerable influence she had in late Qing China, as she had the actual political power from 1861 until her death in 1908. Historians have often portrayed her as a power hungry, selfish and shrewd woman, who used whatever means necessary to keep the power. Moreover, she was xenophobic and deeply conservative. Recently however, there have been scholars such as Jung Chang who put her in a more positive light. At the same time, stories about her cruelties described by historians such as Bland and Blackhouse, have been seriously challenged.¹ Saying she was completely rotten would be exaggerated, but in order for her to exercise her influence for so long, a certain amount of manipulation and ruthlessness is needed. I will also argue that her backwards actions did contribute to the eventual fall of the Qing regime, though that was certainly not the only factor.

Cixi was born on the 29th of November 1835, under the name of Yehonala. She came from a fairly humble background: her father was a non high-ranking government official and the family was not particularly rich.² At the age of sixteen, she was chosen as one of the concubines of the emperor Xianfeng, and gave birth to his only son, Tongzhi.³ When the emperor died in 1861, her son succeeded the throne, but this gave no political power to Cixi.

¹ Chung 1979 p 177-178

² Warner 1986 p 16

³ Encyclopaedia Britannica retrieved from <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/612105/Cixi>

In order to seize power, she staged a coup, known as the Xinyou coup. She employed the help of Emperor Xianfeng's primary wife, Empress Dowager Cian and his brother, Prince Gong to get rid of Sushun, who had been appointed regent.⁴ This plan was all her own doing and it shows that from an early age on, she was already a cunning manipulator. This also allowed her to reign over China for the next 5 decades. I will now discuss how this impacted all of Qing China.

An important part of Cixi's policy, is how she dealt with reforms. During her period of reign there have been three attempts to modernise China, in which Cixi played an important role, both as an obstacle and an initiator. The first one was at the start of her reign, when China was in a weak position compared to other countries and desperately needed to modernise. A great advocate of modernising China was prince Gong, who at that time still had an important role in the court. Under the Self-Strengthening Movement, China even undertook some reforms. In the army, they followed the example of Western-style military armies, and equipped them with modern weapons. Even Cixi understood this to some extent, so initially she did not actively oppose it.⁵ But the problem was that these reforms posed a potential threat to her power, which concerned her more than the country's troubles.⁶ As a result, she started to undermine Prince Gong and the reformers lost all support.⁷ She is certainly not the only reason why the Self-Strengthening Movement wasn't a success, but maybe if it had received adequate support from the Qing court, China would have actually stood a better chance in the Sino-Japanese war for example.

There was a second attempt following defeat in the Sino-Japanese war in 1895. The reform minded Guangxu Emperor tried to implement drastic reforms, during the so-called Hundred Days Reform in 1898. A vast range of educational, military, administrative and

⁴ Chang 2013 p 61-70

⁵ This was arguably also because Prince Gong was still too powerful as a co-regent at that time.

⁶ Silbey 2012 p 29-31

⁷ Kuo and Kwang 1978 p 505-507

economic innovations were announced, aimed to overhaul the entire state organisation. But just like during the Self-Strengthening Movement, his aunt Cixi's conservative mindset would form an obstacle. Although at this point in time she had already gone into retirement, she managed to stage a coup d'état and successfully thwarted the reform plans.⁸ She undid the reforms, placed the Emperor under house arrest and executed other accomplices.⁹ Because of the short time, it's hard to predict how successful the reforms would have been, but one could say that this again proved to be disadvantageous for China.

It was only after the Boxer Rebellion, at the end of her life, that Cixi fully supported modernisation and China finally got the reforms it desperately needed, in nearly all areas. These included abolition of the examination system, changes in the legal system, social reforms. In her biography of Cixi, Jung Chang describes these changes as revolutionising and viewed this period as the period in which China "decidedly crossed the threshold of modernity".¹⁰ This might be a bit of an overestimation because these were not enough to save the Qing dynasty, which would be overthrown and replaced by the Republic of China not much later.¹¹

Not only her conservative stance, but also her xenophobic tendencies had implications for all of Qing China. Cixi reigned during the so-called "Century of Humiliation", during which China was the victim of imperialist foreign powers such as the West and Japan. Because of this, there was naturally a lot of resentment towards foreigners. This also became clear when she initially supported the Boxers during the Boxer Rebellion from 1898 to 1901.

The Boxers were a fiercely violent anti-foreign and anti-Christian movement that started in Shandong province around 1898. They were united under the simple slogan

⁸ Keay 2009 p 544

⁹ Silbey 2012 p 32

¹⁰ Chang 2013 p 375-379

¹¹ Fairbank 2006 p 242-243

"Support the Qing, destroy the foreigner."¹² Their aim was to get rid of the foreign imperialists, which the Qing regime had failed to do. Because of this, Cixi reluctantly decided to give them support at first in the hope that they would be successful. As attacks on foreigners increased, Cixi became more and more convinced of their power and even ordered the Qing army to support the Boxers. On June 21 1900 Cixi herself formally declared war on all the powers saying: "China is weak. The only thing we can depend upon is the hearts of the people. If we lose them, how can we maintain our country?"¹³

When foreign troops came to rescue the foreigners who had sought refuge in the legation quarter in Beijing, Cixi found herself forced to flee. The foreign troops now focused on fighting the anti-foreign Chinese and eventually succeeded. They also asked for Cixi to return, since the Qing regime was still better than a state of chaos.¹⁴ As a result, they were forced to sign the Boxer Protocol, in which the Qing regime was severely punished. High officials were executed, the legation quarter in Beijing was enlarged and Qing forts were destroyed. They also had to pay an indemnity of about \$ 333 million. This all caused the regime to be further handicapped.¹⁵

Cixi is definitely a complex figure, to the extent of seeming contradictory at times. Therefore I have tried to stick to historical facts rather than possibly exaggerated stories in order to assess her influence in Qing China. From these, I conclude that she mostly seems to be driven by self-interest, which made the advancement of the country very hard since this posed a threat to her position. If they had been able to modernise right from the beginning, the consequences would have been less dramatic, and they might have been able to resist the foreign powers better. Japan had shown that it was possible. At the same time, China was

¹² Fairbank 2006 p 230

¹³ Fairbank 2006 p 230-231

¹⁴ Keay 2009 p 547

¹⁵ Fairbank 2006 p 231-232

dealing with other problems as well, and the eventual downfall of Qing China was a complex process caused by multiple factors. Putting all the blame on Cixi would be too simplistic.

DO NOT COPY

Works cited

- Chang, Jung. *Empress Dowager Cixi The Concubine Who Launched Modern China*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2013.
- Chung, Sue Fawn. The Much Maligned Empress Dowager: A Revisionist Study of the Empress Dowager Tz'u-Hsi (1835-1908). *Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 13, No. 2*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979. 177-196.
- Fairbank, John and Merle Goldman. *China: A new history*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Keay, John. *China - A History*. New York: Basic books, 2009.
- Kuo, Ting-yee and Kwang-Ching Liu, Self-strengthening: the pursuit of Western technology. *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 10: Late Ch'ing 1800–1911*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. 491-542.
- Silbey, David J. *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2012.
- Warner, Marina. *The Dragon Empress: Life and Times of Tz'u-hsi 1835-1908 Empress Dowager of China*. New York: The Macmillian Company, 1972.
- "Cixi" *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 2013. Online. Retrieved from <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/612105/Cixi> on 2014-07-07