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From Concubine to Ruler: The Lives of Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager

By Hannah Ferla

Abstract: Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi were the only two women to hold full control over China. They lived during different periods in Chinese history, but they accomplished the same goal. This paper will begin with the history of these two remarkable women, and it will give some background information on the respective dynasties that they lived under, the Tang (618-907) and Qing (1644-1900).¹ Then, the reader will learn about their journeys from the concubines of emperors to the most powerful people in China. Next, this article will cover the interesting information about Empress Dowager Cixi that Princess Der Ling and Sara Pike Conger wrote about in their books. Both authors had a personal relationship with Empress Dowager Cixi. Finally, the article will address some similarities and differences between Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi. The purpose of this article is to convey, not how effective Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi were as rulers of China, but the abilities of these women to rise above their circumstances and become the rulers of a great empire.

Emperor Wu Zetian (r. 624–705) and Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) were remarkable women from Chinese history who began their time at the palace, located in Chang'an for Emperor Wu Zetian's rule and in Beijing for Empress Dowager Cixi's rule,

¹ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History: China*, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 108, 220

as concubines to the emperor.² To become a concubine, the Empress Dowager typically selected a girl from a long list of women based on astrology.³ Then, the empress dowager and the emperor picked the future concubine from a group of about twenty women following an audience.⁴ Despite the luxury of the palace, life as a concubine was not easy for many reasons, some of which include never returning home and “spend[ing] the rest of her life in strict seclusion in the [palace].”⁵ Being a concubine was often believed to be a lonely station because they could only interact with a select few people. During the Tang Dynasty (618–907) when the emperor died, the concubines that gave him children stayed in the palace, while those that had not went to live in nunneries.⁶ To avoid becoming a nun, a concubine had to have the emperor’s child, but there was no guarantee that the emperor would help them with that goal.⁷ In short, becoming a concubine meant that you could never see your family again. Concubines were isolated from anyone that was not the emperor, the empress, or a eunuch, so social interactions were very limited. They also had to compete with one another for the emperor’s attention, in hopes that he would allow them to give him a child. As a result, it was difficult to make friends with the other concubines. Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi entered the palace in a difficult position, but they did not let that stop them from accomplishing their goals.

² Ebrey, 108, 223; N. Harry Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1; X. L. Woo, *Empress Dowager Cixi: China’s Last Dynasty and the Long Reign of a Formidable Concubine* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2002), 5.

³ Charlotte Haldane, *The Last Great Empress of China* (London: Heron Books, 1968), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ Ebrey, 180; X. L. Woo, *Empress Wu the Great: Tang Dynasty China*, 37.

⁷ Becoming a nun meant that the former concubine could not have a relationship with another man, which kept her forever tied to the emperor that she served.

Background and Historiography

Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi became concubines in different ways. Emperor Wu Zetian was the daughter of the emperor's favorite courtier, and at the age of thirteen, Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649) ordered that she become his concubine after hearing of her beauty.⁸ Her journey to the throne began with a unique set of circumstances that demonstrate how unlikely it was for her to take the throne. Empress Dowager Cixi became a concubine when she was sixteen through the normal process of becoming a concubine as discussed above.⁹ Despite it being difficult to be chosen as a concubine, Empress Dowager Cixi won her position over many other women, and it was a precursor to her ability to succeed over others during her climb to power. Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi were concubines that used their ambition to better their situations and gain control over their own lives. They were both able to change their status as the emperor's concubine to the absolute ruler of China. Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi started to increase their power and influence within the court by gaining the emperor's favor and giving him a child. Both women also became involved with government decision-making, further demonstrating their political prowess and value in court. After the death of their husbands (the emperors), Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi ensured that they had full control as regent to the new emperor. In doing so, they were able to keep their hold of the throne, even when tradition would have dictated that their sons took power.

The historiography of Emperor Wu Zetian varies through the years, including a bout of rumors created to ruin her legacy which resulted in later historians attempting to debunk these. Not

⁸ Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 26.

⁹ Marina Warner, *The Dragon Empress: The Life and Times of Tz'U-Hsi, Empress Dowager of China 1835–1908* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 22.

long after her rule, a rumor was invented that claimed that she “smother[ed] her new-born daughter to cast the blame upon Empress Wang” to replace her and become the new empress.¹⁰ This rumor conveys the damaging image of a ruthless woman who would do anything to gain power. The author of *Empress Wu in Fiction and in History*, Dora Shu-Fang Dien, debunks several myths about Emperor Wu Zetian, in which Shu-Fang Dien tries to find the truth hidden beneath the lies. This is an example of some of the efforts to correct rumors and to give an important female historical figure her due. Author X. L. Woo takes a different approach with redefining Emperor Wu Zetian. In *Empress Wu the Great: Tang Dynasty China*, Woo states that Emperor Wu Zetian and Gaozong (628–683), the emperor’s son, were in love with each other regardless of her position as his father’s concubine.¹¹ This demonstrates a romantic view of Emperor Wu Zetian because it shows that it was love, not ambition, that drove her to pursue a relationship with Gaozong. Her focus was her feelings for him, not the position of power that he could give her. The historiography of Emperor Wu Zetian shows two extremes: romanticism and deep cruelty, and it is possible that her true character was somewhere in the middle.

Empress Dowager Cixi also has varying degrees of caricature in her historiography. In *The Dragon Empress*, author Marina Warner shares a myth that states Empress Dowager Cixi killed Tongzhi (1861–875), her own son, to get the power of the throne back.¹² The myth insinuates that she was willing to do anything to get to the throne, including killing her child. However, it is doubtful that she would have killed him because she already had full power over the government when he occupied the throne, so it is unlikely that she would have taken such a drastic measure to obtain something that she already possessed. One could infer

¹⁰ Dora Shu-Fang Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History: Female Defiance in Confucian China* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.), 34.

¹¹ Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 34.

¹² Warner, 125.

that the purpose of the myth was to taint Empress Dowager Cixi's image. Warner presents the falsehoods about Empress Dowager Cixi, and she debunks them to show that Empress Dowager Cixi was not as horrible as historians made her seem. Other authors have also tried to patch up the image of Empress Dowager Cixi. Jung Chang, author of *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine who Launched Modern China*, writes in the epilogue of her book that Empress Dowager Cixi,

brought medieval China into the modern age. Under her leadership, the country began to acquire virtually all the attributes of the modern state: railways, electricity, telegraph, telephones, Western medicine, a modern-style army and navy, and modern ways of conducting foreign trade and diplomacy.¹³

This conflicts with the version of Empress Dowager Cixi intimately known by Princess Der Ling (1885–1944), First Lady-in-Waiting to Empress Dowager Cixi for two years.¹⁴ She writes that Empress Dowager Cixi had a disdain for foreigners and the emperor's attempts to reform to fit their beliefs.¹⁵ Therefore, any movement towards modernization that Empress Dowager Cixi would have made would be slow and necessary. She did not want to change China to conform to the wants of Western countries. Warner explains this, stating that:

Intent on their Confucian vision of the agricultural, frugal society, [Empress Dowager Cixi] and ministers like Prince Kung rejected, however, the idea of

¹³ Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine who Launched Modern China* (New York: Anchor Books, 2013), 371.

¹⁴ Princess Der Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1925), viii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 210–211.

strengthening the country by increasing trade and industry as the West would have liked and would have taught. Throughout the decade they refused more advanced advice to build telegraphs and railways, mines and mills, the organs of the modern world, insisting, correctly, that such innovations would attack the very fibre [sic] of traditional Chinese society.¹⁶

This shows that the historiography that Chang was trying to convey is not accurate. She may have been trying to portray Empress Dowager Cixi as a better ruler than she was. Not all of the books written about a historical figure are accurate as to who they were. Several historians have tried to correct the history written about Empress Dowager Cixi, but some take it too far and create an inaccurate narrative.

The Tang (618–907) and Qing (1644–1900) Dynasties

Emperor Wu Zetian rose to power during the Tang Dynasty (618–907).¹⁷ During this time, women had more freedoms than in the past. In her guide on behavior for Confucian wives, *Admonitions for Women*, Ban Zhao (c. 45–c. 117) wrote about an older custom. On the third day after a baby girl was born, she had to be placed “below the bed [which] plainly indicated that she was lowly and humble and should regard it as a prime duty to submit to others.”¹⁸ Confucianism restricted women to serving everyone around them before themselves. Restrictions lightened up when Steppe (a grassland region in the north) and Chinese culture blended. This “loosened the hold of Confucian values on women” by giving them

¹⁶ Warner, 102.

¹⁷ Ebrey, 180.

¹⁸ Ban Zhao, *Admonitions for Women*, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1*, Second Edition, comp. William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 822.

access to “higher legal status than their counterparts in earlier and later dynasties, though they were still subject to many restrictions.”¹⁹ This may explain why many people were not as opposed to Emperor Wu Zetian co-ruling with her husband as would have been expected. However, there were still gender norms that would have hindered her rise to power. For example, Ban Zhao also explained how women should act:

To choose her words with care, to avoid vulgar language, to speak at appropriate times, and not to be offensive to others may be called womanly speech... With wholehearted devotion to sew and weave, not to love gossip and silly laughter, in cleanliness and order [to prepare] the wine and food for serving guests may be called womanly work.²⁰

Tang society expected women to follow a strict set of rules. It did not allow them to voice their opinions or participate in any activity that was not meant specifically for women, such as the aforementioned sewing, weaving, and serving guests. Emperor Wu Zetian broke each of these expected behaviors by taking the throne. Furthermore, Mr. Yan, or Yanshi Jianxun, wrote *The House Instructions of Mr. Yan* during the Tang Dynasty, and it conveys some Confucian ideas of the time about how a household should be run:

Just in the state, where women are not allowed to participate in setting politics, so in the family, they should not be permitted to assume responsibility for affairs. If they are wise, talented, and versed in the ancient and modern writings, they ought to help their husbands by supplementing the latter’s

¹⁹ N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China’s Only Woman Emperor* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 12.

²⁰ Zhao, 824.

deficiency. No hen should herald the dawn lest
misfortune follow.²¹

This shows how society welcomed Emperor Wu Zetian's intelligence and competency when ruling by her husband's side, but no one expected or wanted a woman to rule alone. That changed when Emperor Wu Zetian came to the throne, and she was able to use some of the main religions practiced at this time (Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism) to her advantage. The Chinese thought these belief systems to be compatible enough to use alongside each other in private practice and in the government.²² They blended to form the religious culture of the period. The characteristics of the Tang Dynasty shaped Emperor Wu Zetian's ascent to the throne and the decisions she made to get there.

Empress Dowager Cixi lived during China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1900).²³ The Manchus, “a non-Chinese people living in the hilly forests and plains to the northeast of China proper,” invaded China as the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) began to fall.²⁴ The Manchus were able to establish their own dynasty after ten years of expanding their control of the country.²⁵ In reaction to the fall of the Ming and the conquest of a non-native group, the Han Chinese shifted towards conservatism. They perceived the “more open and fluid society” as the cause of the change in China's leadership, and “concern for the purity of women reached an all-time high.”²⁶ However, the Han's shift towards conservatism had little impact on the now ruling Manchu

²¹ Yanshi Jianxun, *The House Instructions of Mr. Yan*, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Vol. 1, Second Edition, comp. William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 545.

²² Ebrey, 120.

²³ Ibid., 220.

²⁴ Ibid., 190, 220.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 228–229.

and their practices. The Manchu gave more authority and respect to women than the Han society did. For example, Manchu women did not bind their feet.²⁷ Starting in the Song Dynasty (907–1276), foot binding was a tool used by Han men to control the freedom of women because the pain caused by having their feet tightly bound to alter their shape made it impossible to move anywhere without assistance.²⁸ Therefore, the liberties that Manchu women experienced were not only legal but physical as well. Manchu women's rights and freedoms continued to improve and develop during the Qing, such as the opening of women's schools and the creation of the "Beijing Women's News, a Manchu feminist daily [newspaper]."²⁹ The paper focused on women's issues, such as "women's education, equality of the sexes, and women's independence."³⁰ Despite the increase in conservative thought, Empress Dowager Cixi's rise to power is understandable when considering the expansion of rights for Manchu women. She could only benefit as women received more rights.

Religion also changed during this time as Confucians tried to "free their understandings of the classics from the contamination of Buddhist and Daoist ideas."³¹ This shows a contrast to the Tang emphasis on the blending of all three religions. It also demonstrates another change in culture during the Qing Dynasty. Empress Dowager Cixi came to power in a time when Manchu women, like herself, were gaining more momentum in society and culture as a whole became more conservative.

²⁷ Edward J. M. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861–1928* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 62.

²⁸ Ebrey, 136; Unpublished manuscript of Cynthia De Anda "Foot Binding as a Consequence of the Powerful Women of the Tang."

²⁹ Rhoads, 92–93.

³⁰ Ibid., 94.

³¹ Ebrey, 229.

From Concubine to Ruler of China

Emperor Wu Zetian

Emperor Wu Zetian (r. 624–705) began her life at the palace as a concubine and became the most powerful person in China.³² She started in a low rank, but she began reporting the doings of the other concubines to Emperor Taizong.³³ This allowed her to become well-known and recognized around the palace. From this she was able to catch the eye of the Emperor's son Gaozong, which worked in her favor later.³⁴ When the emperor died, Emperor Wu Zetian was sent to a nunnery to live out her days as she had not given him any children.³⁵ When an emperor passed away, tradition during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) dictated that “those concubines of the deceased emperor who had born children would be confined in their own chambers and those who had not borne any children would all go to a nunnery to be nuns.”³⁶ Any favor a concubine had gained by helping the emperor no longer benefitted her. Tradition had trapped Emperor Wu Zetian at the nunnery without the ability to see her family or friends for the foreseeable future.

All of this changed with Emperor Gaozong, however, because she caught his attention and affection while she was still at the palace, so he began to visit her.³⁷ Gaozong had to hide any feelings he had towards Emperor Wu Zetian until after the death of his father. Although a man's concubine was occasionally given to another to elevate their relationship, a father, especially an emperor, was unlikely to give a concubine to his son because it

³² Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers*, 1.

³³ Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 26–27.

³⁴ Shu-Fang Dien, 33.

³⁵ Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 37.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 37; Ebrey, 180.

³⁷ Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 42.

would be like taking his father's mistress while he was alive.³⁸ Gaozong's affections saved Emperor Wu Zetian from the nunnery and set her life on a new course. After many visits, she gave birth to his son.³⁹ The Emperor brought her back to the palace to be his concubine, and he awarded her a higher status than what she held under his father.⁴⁰ Her position continued to improve as she had more children, gained more of Gaozong's love, and acted in the role of empress by creating standards for court ladies.⁴¹ Gaozong liked Emperor Wu Zetian enough to not only make her his concubine after she was originally his father's but to then make her his new empress. He went against social norms and he had her rule in his stead when he became ill.⁴²

This was the first time a woman in China took the emperor's place "and surprisingly there was no overt protest on the part of high officials at the time."⁴³ As a result, she continued to rule as his equal after he recovered, but she tended to do most of the leading.⁴⁴ This shows that the emperor believed in her ability to rule, so he made her his equal. Despite being a woman, she had control of the government with the emperor's support. Before Emperor Gaozong died, he wanted to ensure that his wife continued to have some influence over the government, so he made her a regent for the new emperor, their adult son Zhongzong (656–710).⁴⁵

Gaozong believed so much in her ability to rule that he wanted her to continue to serve the country after his death, which is shown through the position he gave her. He put her in charge of their adult son because he trusted her abilities over what their son

³⁸ Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 34.

³⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁴¹ Shu-Fang Dien, 34.

⁴² Ibid., 34.

⁴³ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 40.

had to offer. Her husband looked past her gender and recognized her ability and knowledge to rule. Emperor Wu Zetian had co-ruled with Gaozong, so he saw first-hand what she was capable of. As the regent, Emperor Wu Zetian made decrees for her son in court by claiming he “had a speech impediment,” but she was using this to rule in his stead.⁴⁶ Although her son was old enough to take control at any point, she continued to hold on to power, so the emperor was little more than a figurehead. This is evident in Emperor Wu Zetian’s choice to “[defy] the conventional practice of female regents” by showing her face to her audience instead of “staying behind a curtain.”⁴⁷ Female regents could not reveal their faces because they represented the young emperor, and they could not show that they held real power over men. Hiding behind a curtain kept up the illusion that the young emperor was in charge instead of his mother, who really held power. By going against this, Emperor Wu Zetian showed that she was the one pulling the strings, not her son. She did not care what other people thought of her, and she was not afraid to show that she was the most capable person to sit on the throne.

In October 690, she became the “‘Holy and Divine Emperor’ of the new Zhou Dynasty.”⁴⁸ She was the only woman in Chinese history to rule as an emperor. It is unclear why she decided to claim the title of emperor, but one can infer that she did so to convey to others that she was the only one that controlled the country. She was no longer just an empress with influence over the true ruler. Emperor Wu Zetian was a concubine to two emperors, and she used opportunity and ambition to become the most powerful woman in Chinese history up to that point.

⁴⁶ Shu-Fang Dien, 41.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 47–48.

Empress Dowager Cixi

Empress Dowager Cixi (r. 1861–1908) was also a concubine that rose through the ranks to become the most powerful person in China.⁴⁹ She came to the palace as the lowest ranking concubine at the age of sixteen.⁵⁰ Being a concubine usually meant “waiting on the empress dowager as a servant in all but rank” and sometimes never getting to meet the emperor.⁵¹ This is an example of how out of the ordinary it was for concubines to take power. Considering Empress Dowager Cixi’s rank and lack of initial interaction with the emperor, it would have been more likely for her to become a nun like Emperor Wu Zetian did immediately after the death of Emperor Taizong. However, fortunes changed for Empress Dowager Cixi when Empress Zhen (1837–1881) found she could not have more children after giving birth to her daughter. Empress Dowager Cixi had become friends with the empress, and Empress Dowager Cixi may have persuaded some eunuchs to recommend she provide the emperor with an heir.⁵² Therefore, her ability to befriend those around her may have helped her considerably in acquiring that favorable position.

She then gave birth to the only son of Emperor Xianfeng (1831–1861), which increased her concubine rank from the lowest to second only to the empress.⁵³ Empress Dowager Cixi’s ambition led her to befriend those around her who helped her rise above the rest. She may have also been doing so to make her life happier because she only had interactions with the empress, the eunuchs in charge of ensuring the chastity of the concubines, other concubines, and sometimes even the emperor.⁵⁴ She could not see her family and she lived in an area of the palace that was kept

⁴⁹ Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 5.

⁵⁰ Warner, 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 43; Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 5.

⁵⁴ Warner, 30–31.

away from any visitors. This may have caused loneliness that inspired her to make friends with the eunuchs around her. Concubines had to wait on the empress like a servant, so being in her favor would have only made Empress Dowager Cixi's life easier.⁵⁵

Early on, Emperor Xianfeng let her be involved in the daily tasks of the government.⁵⁶ However, her vocal stance against the emperor's decision to flee rather than fight invaders during the Second Opium War (1856–1860), resulted in her losing any influence she had gained over him and the court.⁵⁷ She had been in an important position as an advisor to the emperor, but she lost it all when she disagreed with the actions he was taking. This shows that Empress Dowager Cixi was a tough woman that believed in standing her ground and speaking out about the emperor's mistake. As a result, he lashed out at her because a woman pointed out his weakness, so he punished her and took away the control that she had. She continued to be ignored by the emperor until he was on his deathbed and she forced her way into his room to demand that he make her son his heir instead of one of his many brothers, which he ended up doing.⁵⁸ Empress Dowager Cixi took her future into her own hands by physically going to her husband to take what she wanted, which shows an ambition to move above her status of merely a former concubine.

Concubines that gave the emperor a child had the security of a place to live in the palace with their children. Empress Dowager Cixi took a risk to improve her station, but her priority was to protect the throne that rightfully belonged to her son. Empress Dowager Cixi and the empress became regents and received the rank of empress dowager, the mother of the emperor that ruled in his stead until he was old enough to rule alone, which

⁵⁵ Warner, 29.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 78; Woo, *Empress Wu the Great*, 7.

⁵⁸ Warner, 85.

gave them “precedent over the eight seasoned regents.”⁵⁹ Empress Dowager Cixi was one of the most powerful people in the court, having much sway over the government. Her brother-in-law Prince Kang (1877–1955), the brother of the former emperor and husband to Empress Dowager Cixi’s younger sister, worked with the empresses to pass an edict under the child emperor’s name.⁶⁰ The edict “stripped the regents of all their offices, blamed them—with some reason—for the recent troubles of China and arrested them.”⁶¹ Through this edict, Empress Dowager Cixi and her fellow Empress Dowager were the most powerful people in China. This shows Empress Dowager Cixi getting rid of the people that stood between her and complete control of the government. Although she shared the throne with Empress Zhen, Empress Dowager Cixi held the most power due to her ability to sway her co-ruler’s opinion.⁶² Empress Dowager Cixi began her life in the palace as a concubine, used her connections to get the emperor to notice her, and relied on her own ambitions to secure a position of power.

Retaining Power Over China

Emperor Wu Zetian

After securing her position as emperor, Emperor Wu Zetian had to take unique steps to make herself appear to be a legitimate ruler to those around her. Association with political ancestors was not a new concept when Emperor Wu Zetian began using it. Emperor Taizong established a new form of legitimization in which “authority depended more on association with a great tradition of virtuous political ancestors than blood succession.”⁶³ Emperor Wu

⁵⁹ Warner, 85.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 87.

⁶¹ Ibid., 87.

⁶² Ibid., 85.

⁶³ Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers*, 7.

Zetian utilized this technique to her advantage by using the three religions to legitimize herself, so she could appease everyone in the empire that questioned her. She began her political career by relating herself to the traditional Chinese goddesses of silk, the Luo River, and creation, which worked to influence the older generations of China.⁶⁴ They compared her to these older and traditional goddesses, and they thought she, by association, was traditional enough to sit on the throne. When she became the mother of the emperor, she compared herself to important mothers of Confucianism.⁶⁵ She wanted to appear as the mother of China who was following tradition by comparing herself to influential Confucian mothers, but she was also breaking tradition by being a woman in charge of the country.

Emperor Wu Zetian also added “a range of female Daoist divinities into her pantheon of forebears,” which appealed to strong believers of Daoism.⁶⁶ She made herself into a figure that was more godlike than human, thereby deserving of their allegiance for being holy. After someone discovered a stone with the message that a Sage Mother would rule China, Emperor Wu Zetian took on the name “Sage Mother, Divine Sovereign.”⁶⁷ This shows how she used a prediction for personal gain. Naming herself after the prophecy would make it self-fulfilling, thereby gaining the respect of the people. Emperor Wu Zetian also used Buddhism to her advantage when she joined its pantheon in 690 after the official Buddhist clergy named the empress the Bodhisattva Maitreya.⁶⁸ She became a powerful divinity within the religion, which allowed her to earn her place on the throne because the people believed that a divine being would be the best candidate to hold power. Using the techniques of past emperors, Emperor Wu Zetian displayed to

⁶⁴ Rothschild, *Emperor Wu Zhao and Her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and Dynastic Mothers*, 16–17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁷ Shu-Fang Dien, 45.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

the people of China that she had the Mandate of Heaven.⁶⁹ She had deities and authority figures from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism to justify her rule.

Empress Dowager Cixi

Empress Dowager Cixi kept power by getting rid of those that threatened her rule. The first to feel her wrath was Prince Kang, her brother-in-law. She felt that she owed him a debt since he helped her get the throne, and she did not want him to take advantage of that debt. As a result, she got rid of him and put someone she could trust in his place. She accused him of trying to hurt her, then replaced him with Prince Chun (1883–1951).⁷⁰ When her son died, Empress Dowager Cixi adopted Prince Chun's three-year-old son Zaitian (Tsai-t'ien, 1887–1908), so he could become the next emperor, which went against Confucian tradition because the boy she adopted was not next in line for the throne.⁷¹ She gave power to the person she could raise to eventually control, while also keeping power as he came of age.⁷² Empress Dowager Cixi's reputation for getting rid of those that threatened her power caused historians to speculate whether she was involved in the death of her fellow empress dowager. The two rose to power together, but Empress Dowager Zhen died coincidentally in 1881 after getting into a fight with Empress Dowager Cixi and her top eunuch.⁷³ Although there was no proof that Empress Dowager Cixi ordered her to be poisoned, historian Charlotte Haldane argues that

⁶⁹ William de Bary and Irene Bloom, "Chapter 2: Classical Sources of Chinese Tradition," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1*. Second Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 27. The Mandate of Heaven was the divine right to rule that gave legitimacy to a ruler, which could be taken away at any point.

⁷⁰ Warner, 114.

⁷¹ Ibid., 127.

⁷² Ibid., 127.

⁷³ Haldane, 101.

the coincidence should not be overlooked.⁷⁴ In order to keep her hold on the government, Empress Dowager Cixi neutralized any threat that reared its head.

Friends of Empress Dowager Cixi

To better understand who Empress Dowager Cixi was, we can look at *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, the memoir of Princess Der Ling, and *Letters from China*, a collection of letters written by Sarah Pike Conger (1843–1932). Princess Der Ling was the First Lady-in-Waiting to Empress Dowager Cixi for two years, from 1903 to 1905.⁷⁵ She spent almost every day with Empress Dowager Cixi, so she can give the clearest view of who the Empress Dowager was behind closed doors. Sarah Pike Conger was the wife of an American minister to China.⁷⁶ Her book is a collection of letters that she wrote to friends and family during her stay in China from 1898 to 1908.⁷⁷ She had several audiences with Empress Dowager Cixi and developed a close relationship with her, which came as a surprise to those who knew Empress Dowager Cixi. As stated previously, Empress Dowager Cixi did not like foreigners.⁷⁸ Princess Der Ling further elaborated on Empress Dowager Cixi's feelings towards foreigners and quoted her as saying:

I can tell in a moment...whether any of these people are desirous of showing proper respect to me, or whether they consider that I am not entitled to it. These foreigners seem to have the idea that the Chinese are ignorant and that,

⁷⁴ Haldane, 101.

⁷⁵ Der Ling, viii.

⁷⁶ Sarah Pike Conger, *Letters from China: With Particular Reference to the Empress Dowager and the Women of China* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1909), vii.

⁷⁷ Ibid., ix–xi.

⁷⁸ Der Ling, 210–211.

therefore, they need not be so particular as in European Society.⁷⁹

Empress Dowager Cixi saw foreigners in China attempt to erase Chinese culture. She saw through their facades of respect as hiding their true feelings which saw her as less than themselves. This ability shows that she trusted Conger despite her country of origin. Like Princess Der Ling, Conger also gives an intimate look at who Empress Dowager Cixi was.



"The Portrait of the Qing Dynasty Cixi Imperial Dowager Empress of China" by Hubert Vos (1855–1935), dated 1906. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Der Ling, 367.

⁸⁰ Image made public domain because the copyright term is the author's life plus 80 years or fewer. Hubert Vos, "The Portrait of the Qing Dynasty Cixi Imperial Dowager Empress of China" oil on canvas, 1906, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Portrait_of_the_Qing_Dynasty_Cixi_Imperial_Dowager_Empress_of_China.PNG.

One incident that links these two accounts is Conger's idea of having Empress Dowager Cixi's portrait painted. Conger stated that she "had conceived the idea of asking her Majesty [Empress Dowager Cixi] permission to speak with her upon the subject of having her painted."⁸¹ Princess Der Ling describes the same event in her memoir. She explains that Mrs. Conger asked Empress Dowager Cixi if she would be willing to have an American artist paint her a portrait, so Americans could get a clearer understanding of who she was.⁸² This retelling of the event gives a new perspective and clearer understanding of what happened during this exchange. Mrs. Conger did not speak Chinese, and Empress Dowager Cixi could not speak English. As a result, Princess Der Ling and a missionary that accompanied Mrs. Conger translated for them. Therefore, Princess Der Ling was privy to information that Mrs. Conger could not understand. During this event, she says that at one moment Empress Dowager Cixi spoke "in the Court language, which the visitors were unable to understand, it being somewhat different from the ordinary Chinese language."⁸³ The Court language was a different dialect only understood by those in court, which separated it from the language of the everyday person possibly to maintain superiority. What these two accounts give us is a complete perspective of what was happening around Empress Dowager Cixi: the person that was always by her side and the person on the outside looking in. Princess Der Ling and Mrs. Conger gave a detailed recounting of their time with Empress Dowager Cixi.

These two women had a unique opportunity to see who Empress Dowager Cixi really was. For example, Princess Der Ling stated in her memoir:

I had been told that the Empress had a very fierce temper, but seeing her so kind and gracious to us

⁸¹ Conger, 247–248.

⁸² Der Ling, 199.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 200.

and talking to us in such a motherly way, I thought that my informant must be wrong and that she was the sweetest woman in the world.⁸⁴

This shows that Empress Dowager Cixi was more gracious than the media would have had people believe. Princess Der Ling got to experience a side of her that she hid from the rest of the world. She may have wanted to appear tough and strong so others would not take advantage of her. Mrs. Conger made a similar comment. In one letter, she explained the reason why she wanted to have the portrait painted. She stated that “[f]or many months I had been indignant over the horrible, unjust caricatures of Her Imperial Majesty in illustrated papers, and with a growing desire that the world might see her as she really is.”⁸⁵ Just like Princess Der Ling, Mrs. Conger also thought that Empress Dowager Cixi was a better person than the world believed. She wanted to show everyone that the person she knew was not the person they read about. These two perspectives show a caring and kind woman.

However, Princess Der Ling also wrote about the side of Empress Dowager Cixi that was not so sweet. She told the story of the lessons that Empress Dowager Cixi would conduct for the ladies-in-waiting:

The younger eunuchs also took part in these lessons and some of their answers to Her Majesty’s questions were very amusing. If Her Majesty were in a good humor she would laugh with the rest of us, but sometimes she would order them to be punished for their ignorance and stupidity.⁸⁶

This shows that Empress Dowager Cixi could be difficult to deal with. Sometimes she was happy, and other times she became easily

⁸⁴ Der Ling, 43.

⁸⁵ Conger, 247–248.

⁸⁶ Der Ling, 376.

agitated. From the writings of these two women that personally knew Empress Dowager Cixi, it is evident that she was a woman who was nice to her friends but was authoritative when necessary. These two books paint a better picture of who Empress Dowager Cixi was, but they cannot tell how her rule affected the average person in China. It is possible that she was a good person but an unfair ruler.

Princess Der Ling gave an interesting insight into the relationship between Empress Dowager Cixi and the emperor. She observed that Empress Dowager Cixi sat on a throne while the emperor sat on an ordinary chair.⁸⁷ The separation of the two seats shows that Empress Dowager Cixi was the one with all the power. The emperor did not even get a fake throne to sit on. It was evident to everyone who came to see Empress Dowager Cixi and the emperor that she was the one in charge. Furthermore, when talking to her ladies-in-waiting and some foreign guests, Empress Dowager Cixi revealed a desire to travel the world, but she stated, “[b]y the time I returned I should not know the place anymore, I’m afraid. Here everything depends on me. Our Emperor is quite young.”⁸⁸ This shows Empress Dowager Cixi revealing how much the country truly relied on her guidance and control. She did not trust the emperor to take over for her if she decided to leave or retire. In her opinion, he was not competent enough to rule.

Furthermore, the emperor was not very different from any other person at the palace. Princess Der Ling stated that “[e]verybody, with the exception of the Court ladies, had to kneel when [Empress Dowager Cixi] was speaking to them. Even the Emperor himself was no exception to this rule.”⁸⁹ She explained that the constant conversation between the ladies-in-waiting and Empress Dowager Cixi would make it tedious to have to always bow when speaking.⁹⁰ This is the most obvious evidence that

⁸⁷ Der Ling, 190.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 198.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 217.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 218.

Empress Dowager Cixi held full control of the government. The emperor was supposed to be the most powerful person in China. He had the Mandate of Heaven so he ruled with the favor of the gods. Although the younger generation respected their elders, an adult son had the authority over his mother so the emperor should have had superiority over Empress Dowager Cixi. However, this shows that the emperor held nothing more than a title. Princess Der Ling's memoir shows that Empress Dowager Cixi was the true ruler of China, and the emperor was merely a figurehead.

Comparing Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi

Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi had several similarities. Not only were they concubines that went on to rule China, but they also used similar tactics to stay in power as long as possible. One interesting commonality was their ability to aid other women during their rule. They each attempted to grant women more rights, but neither of them succeeded in creating long-lasting change.

Emperor Wu Zetian's impact on women was focused within the court. She raised the social status of women by creating an examination system that allowed them to take part in banquets at court.⁹¹ She also had lower level female officials.⁹² Authors Hu Shen-sheng, Feng Tan-feng, and Huang Lung-chen explain that this did not give these women any power, but it increased their social status by giving them the ability to appear at court. Women may not have been able to control government proceedings, but they were physically there to remind officials that women were a part of the country. Emperor Wu Zetian showed that women could advise a leader, just like men. She was demonstrating that she could run the country, and other women could help, too. Although

⁹¹ Hu Shen-sheng, Feng Tan-feng, and Huang Lung-chen, "Female Emperor Uu Tse-T'ien," *Chinese Studies in History* 8, no. 4 (1975): 24.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 24.

her efforts may not have had a lasting impact, they convey her motivation to help other women in China.

Empress Dowager Cixi also tried to help women. She passed an edict that called for the end of foot binding.⁹³ As stated previously, Manchu women did not bind their feet, but it was a practice that Han women continued to follow. Empress Dowager Cixi wanted to give more freedom to the women in her country that did not have much. She did not want them to suffer through a tradition that was “so injurious to health and inhuman in practice.”⁹⁴ Despite the effort, this portion of her edict was unsuccessful. Empress Dowager Cixi addressed Mrs. Conger about the edict’s results saying, “the Chinese move slowly. Our customs are so fixed that it takes much time to change them.”⁹⁵ Although they were not successful, Empress Dowager Cixi tried to improve the lives of women in China.

Nevertheless, Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi also have some differences. Emperor Wu Zetian was sent to a nunnery and wooed an emperor that she had not been the concubine to. Empress Dowager Cixi fell out of favor with her emperor but was able to gain it back on his deathbed. One major way in which they differed was their method of ruling. Emperor Wu Zetian passed edicts that helped her people, while also helping herself. She tried to get on the good side of Chinese people. Empress Dowager Cixi, on the other hand, passed an edict that appeared to help the people, but it only succeeded in preserving her public image. The similarities and differences between Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi demonstrate their unique tactics for handling circumstances despite their common background.

⁹³ E. Backhouse and J. O. P Bland, *China Under the Empress Dowager: Being the History of the Life and Times of Tzū His, Compiled from State Papers and the Private Diary of the Comptroller of Her Household* (London: William Heinemann, 1910), 428.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 428.

⁹⁵ Conger, 254.

Additionally, despite having the same humble beginnings, Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi differed in their ability to rule the country. In 684, Emperor Wu Zetian passed an Act of Grace, “an imperial decree to reward merit and pardon convicted felons on auspicious occasions.”⁹⁶ The act gave Emperor Wu Zetian’s mother the title of “‘Empress Dowager,’ implying her own status of Emperor,” improved the bureaucracy, brought relief to the poor, tax relief for some, and some troops were allowed to go home to worship ancestors, just to name a few.⁹⁷ In this act, Emperor Wu Zetian attempted to legitimize herself while also helping her people. Although there is some speculation as to her true intentions behind the act, she still aided those in need. This shows that she was able to do great things for her country and secure her place of power.

The same is not true for Empress Dowager Cixi. When she was in power, she faced the Boxer Uprising (1899–1901). During the uprising and subsequent war, she passed a decree under the emperor’s name that stated Prince Chuang (1853–1912), “acting as the leader of the savage Boxers, put to death many innocent persons. As a mark of clemency unmerited by these crimes, we grant him permission to commit suicide.”⁹⁸ This shows an effort to end the uprising and protect her people. She ordered its alleged leader to kill himself after the many deaths he caused. Yet after the uprising, she changed her tune. She passed a degree that read, “[t]he Degrees issued at that time were the work of wicked Princes and Ministers of State, who, taking advantage of the chaotic condition of affairs, did not hesitate to issue documents under the Imperial seal, which were quite contrary to our wishes.”⁹⁹ This shows an attempt to cover her tracks. She wanted to appear to be on the side of the Boxers.

⁹⁶ Shu-Fang Dien, 42.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 42–43.

⁹⁸ Backhouse and Bland, 365.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 375.

In *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, Princess Der Ling revealed Empress Dowager Cixi's true opinion of events. In a conversation with Princess Der Ling, she conveyed her thoughts about the Boxers:

Do you know how the Boxer rising began? Why, the Chinese Christians were to blame. The Boxers were treated badly by them and wanted revenge. Of course that is always the trouble with the low class of people. They went too far, and at the same time thought to make themselves rich by setting fire to every house in Peking...These Chinese Christians are the worst people in China. They rob the poor country people of their land and property, and the missionaries, of course, always protect them, in order to get a share themselves.¹⁰⁰

This shows that Empress Dowager Cixi sympathized with the Boxers. She disliked foreign religions coming into China and converting her people. She thought these new Christians unfairly treated those that refused to convert. This change in opinions brings to question her earlier decision to order the death of the Boxer's leader. It is possible that she was trying to save her image in the face of the destruction that they were causing. Others, like authors J. O. P. Bland and E. Backhouse, believe that she opposed the Boxers to save her own skin as they made their way closer to her own home.¹⁰¹ When looking at these pieces of legislation, it is clear that these two rulers had different tactics for ruling China. Although both appear to be serving themselves, only one woman could help her people while helping herself.

¹⁰⁰ Der Ling, 179.

¹⁰¹ Backhouse and Bland, 365.

Conclusion

Despite all odds, Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi used opportunity and ambition to rise above their circumstances and become the only female rulers in the history of China. What makes their positions of power more remarkable is that they began life at the palace as concubines to the emperor. Both women put in hard work, but they also faced unique circumstances that allowed them to climb the ranks.

As this article has shown, it was possible that they both could have ended up in nunneries. In Emperor Wu Zetian's case, she did end up there at first, but she was able to get herself back to the palace. Emperor Wu Zetian caught the eye of the new emperor and gained success. For Empress Dowager Cixi, the empress could no longer have children, so she used networking to get the attention of the emperor. She put herself in a position to give the emperor a child and she was able to climb the social ladder from the lowest status to ranking just under the empress. This shows that both women took the situations before them and used them to their advantage.

As women ruling in a patriarchal society, they had to ensure they kept a tight hold on power. Emperor Wu Zetian used religion to associate herself with gods and influential women, just as other emperors had done before her. Empress Dowager Cixi, on the other hand, got rid of any competition that stood in her way and kept only loyal people around her. Empress Dowager Cixi was willing to take out anyone she needed to, while Emperor Wu Zetian chose to use tradition in her favor. Despite being the most powerful people in China, both women continued to be ambitious and strove to hold onto their power as long as possible. They refused to give up despite the obstacles that they had to face. Emperor Wu Zetian helped the people of her country while using tradition to help herself. She made her mother an empress dowager to further legitimize her position as emperor, and she also gave soldiers time off to worship their ancestors, showing her support for tradition and religious practices. When allowed to further their

public appeal, both rulers took it. They were both willing to do what they could to keep power, including increasing support for them from the people.

Overall, Emperor Wu Zetian and Empress Dowager Cixi were a sight to behold. Against all odds, they rose above the patriarchy and their position as concubines to rule all of China. Although they may not have been the greatest rulers in Chinese history, they demonstrated the power that women can have in the face of adversity, no matter the place or period.

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