

A Revolutionary Figure: Empress Dowager Cixi

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When we first entered the gardens, they reminded us of one of those magic grounds described in fairy tales; we marched from them upon the 19th October leaving them a dreary wasteland.¹ This is how Lieutenant Colonel Wolseley described the brutal burning of The Old Summer Palace by the British, which marked the end of the Second Opium War. The Treaty of Beijing, signed on the 24th of October 1860, ceded Kowloon to Britain,² and on the 14th of November, Prince Gong signed another Treaty with Russia which gave hundreds of thousands of square kilometres of land to China's neighbour.³ Yet, less than a century later China's economy had transformed from a predominantly closed and agrarian one to a far more industrial, open economy - by the late 1920s imports and exports made up 'one eighth of GNP and represented 2.3 per cent of total world trade.'⁴ The woman responsible for this revolutionary shift in the foundations of China's economy and social structure was the Empress Dowager Cixi, and it is no exaggeration to say that her feat of modernising 19th century China places her among the core creators of the modern world. Not only did the Dowager Empress scrap the 'closed-door' policies adopted by the previous Emperors, but this 'Herculean process'⁵ was continued

despite the wars and defeats China endured during the course of the 19th century. Although traditional narratives depict the Empress Dowager Cixi as a 'semi-illiterate woman' who deferred to Prince Gong in political matters,⁶ or as a conservative tyrant only worried about 'losing [her] own power',⁷ these were fabrications, with the latter having been invented by Cixi's political enemy, Kang Youwei. In fact, Cixi was neither passive nor conservative, but a driven reformer who incrementally brought about China's economic transformation.

The extent of Cixi's political revolution is evident when examining China's nineteenth century policy changes, before which trade with foreign powers was suppressed and after which it constituted a core and irreplaceable component of the country's economy. Cixi's Qing predecessors had adopted an aggressive stance towards trade with foreign powers. The Opium Wars fought under Emperor Qianlong and then Emperor Xianfeng were both sparked when the Qing dynasty limited contact between the West and China: In the first war, Emperor Qianlong refused Lord Macartney's requests to open more ports than just Canton for trade and wrote to King George III 'threatening to use force to repel British cargo ships, should they come to his coast.'⁸ This blatant hostility between China and the

¹ Chang, J., 2014. *Empress Dowager Cixi*. London: Vintage Books, p.33.

² Nield, R., 2010. 'Treaty Ports and other Foreign Stations in China', Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch, p.216.

³ Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p.37.

⁴ Brandt, L., 1997. 'Reflections On China's Late 19Th And Early 20Th-Century Economy', Cambridge University Press. p.285.

⁵ Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p.55.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.56.

⁷ Mhlhahn, K., 2019. 'Making China Modern', Harvard University Press, p.189.

⁸ Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p.21-22.

Western powers that characterised China's foreign policy for the first half of the nineteenth century makes Cixi's acceptance of foreign military aid to help repress the Taiping Rebellion all the more striking. While Emperor Xianfeng had refused this same offer, the Empress Dowager Cixi allowed Frederick Ward and then Charles Gordon, an English officer, to lead the 'Ever-victorious Army' within China's borders.⁹ Gordon's army enjoyed military successes and was disbanded in 1864 with Cixi publicly praising Gordon and rewarding him with 10,000 taels of silver and a mandarin jacket in the royal yellow colour.¹⁰ After the Marquis Zheng's army captured Nanjing and defeated the Taiping in the July of 1864, Cixi restored peace and re-evaluated and reshaped China's relationship with foreign military powers, exploiting this dynamic to stabilise her country. Cixi's revolution of Chinese policy did not go unnoticed: the British government observed 'China is now prepared to enter intimate relations with foreigners instead of ...endeavouring to prevent all intercourse whatever with them' as a 'co-operative policy' was adopted.¹¹ The significance of Cixi's acceptance of this 'co-operative policy', as her assent of the 'Ever-victorious Army' demonstrates, is not to be underestimated. It would prove to be the foundations of Chinese trade with foreign powers. Thus, the joint response to the Taiping rebellion marks a crucial turning point in China's relations with foreign powers, and it was a turning point that the Empress Dowager Cixi had engineered.

The relationship fostered during the Taiping Rebellion fed into Cixi's 'open door' economic policy and contributed towards China's vastly increased levels of trade. Cixi used the alliances forged by the Taiping rebellion as a means of gradually restructuring and expanding her country's economy, a change in policy which ensures her place as one of the main creators of modern China and the modern world.

Cixi's position on trade is reflected in the economic growth Shanghai experienced: under Emperor Xianfeng, about 1000 ships visited Shanghai, whereas in 1863, two years into Cixi's reign, the number of cargo ships had leapt to 6800.¹² Under Cixi's reign, annual revenue doubled from around 40 million taels to 88 million; one third was earned through custom duties, a direct result of the Empress' 'open door' policy and the increased trade in Shanghai.¹³ Cixi used this newfound source of revenue to import grain and feed the population; in 1867, 1.1 million taels were spent on importing rice.¹⁴ The Dowager Empress re-energised the Chinese economy, alleviating poverty through trade, and introduced new technology, improving efficiency. In 1875, Cixi trialled coal-mining in Kaiping, 'the cradle of modern Chinese industry',¹⁵ which led to seventeen electricity companies being set up in Beijing and other big cities.¹⁶ Through her introduction of new technology and new sources of income to China, the Dowager Empress planted the seeds of China's modern and industrial economy. Cixi's revolution of China's finances in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was, therefore, a remarkable one, with its sheer and unprecedented scale and lasting success. Not only was the Empress' reform one which reshaped China's economy, but it also redefined the foundations of the world economy. The Dowager Empress transformed China from an insular, 'closed (or at best semi-closed)'¹⁷ nation to one which dominated world trade. It is the uniquely widespread and lasting impact of Cixi's economic policies on China which ensures the Dowager Empress's place among the revolutionary creators of the modern world.

Two contradictory narratives underestimate or simply reject Cixi's success in reforming China. The first characterises Cixi as a puppet, a figurehead Empress who had policy dictated to her by first

⁹ Chang, J., 2014. *Empress Dowager Cixi*. London: Vintage Books, p.59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.57.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.63.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.124.

¹⁷ Brandt, 'Reflections On China's Late 19Th And Early 20Th-Century Economy', p.284.

Prince Gong and then the young Emperor Guangxu. The second depicts Cixi as the opposite: a power-hungry, conservative ruler who was the puppet-master, governing through the Emperor from behind the scenes. Neither interpretation is correct. Far from a passive ruler serving only in title, Cixi was intimately involved with decisions involving policy. The Empress' orders were given verbally to the Grand Council and then written up as decrees. Once sealed by the Empress, the Grand Councillors, including Prince Gong, were forbidden from changing the decree.¹⁸ This dynamic, with the Empress as Prince Gong's superior, is captured in a letter she sent him in 1862. In this, Cixi wrote, 'Shanghai is but a remote corner [...] yet, thanks to the congregation of foreign and Chinese merchants, it has been a rich source for maintaining the army. I hear that in the past two months it has collected 800,000 taels in import duty alone.'¹⁹ This, as one of many shrewd political observations Cixi made over the course of her reign, suggests that her involvement in China's politics was highly significant. The letters exchanged between the Empress and Prince Gong undermine the interpretation of Cixi as a political puppet. Instead, the documented discussions, which include Cixi's instructions on Gordon's 'Ever-victorious army' and then Robert Hart's 1865 memorandum (which, according to the Dowager Empress, made 'some good points in his evaluation of Chinese government, military, finance'²⁰), point to the contrary and cement the fact that the Dowager Empress was a main driver of her country's reform.

Kang Youwei's depiction of Cixi as a manipulative 'dragon lady', championing the traditionalist policies of China's past while he was a beacon of reform, is also fictitious. This narrative spread

when Kang falsified documents in order to paint himself as an ambitious revolutionary in favour of a parliamentary-style system of governance.²¹ Conversely, much of Cixi's 'opposition to the Emperor's policy of reform', as the historian Edmund Backhouse argues, 'was the result of personal pique and outraged dignity.'²² Kang Youwei's and then Edmund Backhouse's attack on Cixi consisted of one main accusation: that Cixi had prevented Kang's reformist policies and that the Dowager Empress was therefore against China's reform.²³ It is true the Dowager Empress was 'alarmed' by such drastic policies as the abolition edict, which dismissed a host of officials and which Cixi feared could lead to a 'loss of goodwill and support' for the throne.²⁴ However, it does not follow that Cixi was against introducing new technologies and procedures to China. While Kang's Hundred Days Reform was more ambitious than Cixi's policies, it was impractical and led to widespread resentment of his instructions which culminated in the popular slogan, 'eat Kang.'²⁵ And although Kang aimed to weed out corrupt officials as a part of his reform, the speed with which Kang planned to impose these reforms threatened to break 'the very wheels by which Chinese officialdom moved.'²⁶ That Cixi aimed for a more gradual policy change hardly makes her a zealous conservative, as Kang implied.²⁷ In fact, Cixi's innovative policies discussed above and her initial support of Kang's less radical ideas (when Wild Fox Kang recommended the formation of an Advisory Board to the Emperor in 1898, Cixi invited a number of top officials to debate the idea and asked them to 'give the matter serious thought'²⁸) prove the contrary; the Dowager Empress was a persistent supporter of 'self-strengthening' reform. Cixi's achievements have been largely

¹⁸ Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p.57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.66.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.242.

²² Bland, J. and Backhouse, E., 2007. *China Under The Empress Dowager*. [Whitefish, MT]: Kessinger Publishing, p.493.

²³ Chang, J., 2014. *Empress Dowager Cixi*. London: Vintage Books, p.242.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.228.

²⁵ Grasso, J., Corrin, J. and Kort, M., 2018. 'Modernization And Revolution In China'. New York: Routledge, p.60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.60.

²⁷ Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p.242.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.225.

ignored as China's economic boom was not experienced until years later. Even by 1949 the economy was still predominantly agrarian, with almost two thirds of the country's GNP originating in agriculture.²⁹ But to infer from this that Cixi's achievements in the previous century were inconsequential would be incorrect. Cixi's success was not in completely transforming China's economy, but in changing the country's political direction towards open trade. Her success was in gently introducing new technologies, new modern policies and new foreign relations such that China was equipped for its future economic development. As the economist Loren Brandt correctly notes, China's 'economic growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was along the same extensive trajectory as that of the Qing'.³⁰ The Dowager Empress was not single-handedly responsible for China's fiscal successes in the twentieth century and in the modern world, but Cixi did pave the way for this growth to be attainable. Under her reign, 'the embryo of a modern China had taken shape'.³¹ The industrialisation and reversal of attitudes towards foreign trade China underwent in the nineteenth century was crucial in that it directly enabled China to become a major economic power in the modern world. So, while Cixi's revolution of Chinese policy was not the most bloody, nor the most immediate in its economic and social impact, there is no doubt that the Dowager Empress's successful adoption of an 'open door' policy, regarding China's trade, education system and governance, confirms her to be one of the key creators of the modern world and history's most revolutionary figure. ment – past, present and future – of our society.

²⁹ Brandt, 'Reflections On China's Late 19Th And Early 20Th-Century Economy', p.282.

³⁰ Ibid., p.283.

³¹ Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, p.141.