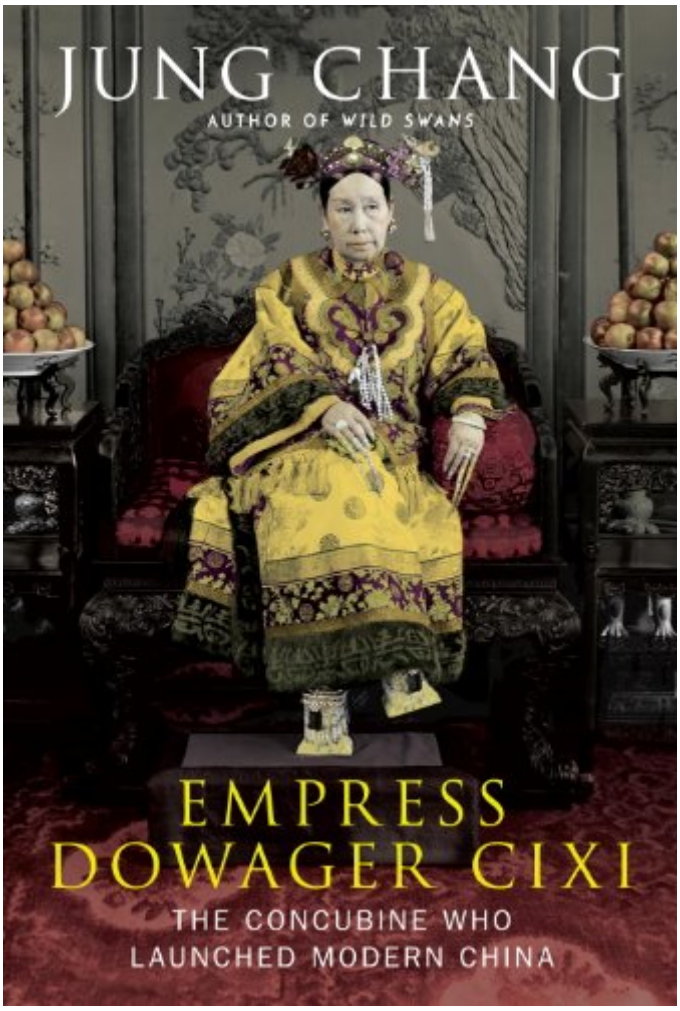
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Empress Dowager Cixi



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Synopsis

A New York Times Notable BookEmpress Dowager Cixi (1835Ã¢â ¬â œ1908) is the most important woman in Chinese history. She ruled China for decades and brought a medieval empire into the modern age. At the age of sixteen, in a nationwide selection for royal consorts, Cixi was chosen as one of the emperorÃ¢â ¬â„¢s numerous concubines. When he died in 1861, their five-year-old son succeeded to the throne. Cixi at once launched a palace coup against the regents appointed by her husband and made herself the real ruler of ChinaÃ¢â ¬â •behind the throne, literally, with a silk screen separating her from her officials who were all male. In this groundbreaking biography, Jung Chang vividly describes how Cixi fought against monumental obstacles to change China. Under her the ancient country attained virtually all the attributes of a modern state: industries, railways, electricity, the telegraph and an army and navy with up-to-date weaponry. It was she who abolished gruesome punishments like Ã¢â ¬Å“death by a thousand cutsÃ¢â ¬Â• and put an end to foot-binding. She inaugurated womenÃ¢â ¬â„¢s liberation and embarked on the path to introduce parliamentary elections to China. Chang comprehensively overturns the conventional view of Cixi as a diehard conservative and cruel despot. Cixi reigned during extraordinary times and had to deal with a host of major national crises: the Taiping and Boxer rebellions, wars with France and JapanÃ¢â ¬â •and an invasion by eight allied powers including Britain, Germany, Russia and the United States. Jung Chang not only records the Empress DowagerÃ¢â ¬â„¢s conduct of domestic and foreign affairs, but also takes the reader into the depths of her splendid Summer Palace and the harem of BeijingÃ¢â ¬â„¢s Forbidden City, where she lived surrounded by eunuchsÃ¢â ¬â •one of whom she fell in love, with tragic consequences. The world Chang describes here, in fascinating detail, seems almost unbelievable in its extraordinary mixture of the very old and the very new. Based on newly available, mostly Chinese, historical documents such as court records, official and private correspondence, diaries and eyewitness accounts, this biography will revolutionize historical thinking about a crucial period in ChinaÃ¢â ¬â„¢sÃ¢â ¬â •and the worldÃ¢â ¬â„¢sÃ¢â ¬â •history. Packed with drama, fast paced and gripping, it is both a panoramic depiction of the birth of modern China and an intimate portrait of a woman: as the concubine to a monarch, as the absolute ruler of a third of the worldÃ¢â ¬â„¢s population, and as a unique stateswoman.From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Author Jung Chang was very successful with her semi private history of 20th century China, the Wild Swans. She upset some readers with her next book, a very critical and very readable bio of Mao.Now she comes out with a new surprise, a rehabilitation of the much reviled Empress Dowager Cixi.Cixi, in this book, is not the xenophobic shrew with the perverse lusts. That portrait, says JC, was based on her opponents' sensationalist calumny and ideological dishonesty.JC's correction of myths begins pre Cixi, with emperor Qianlong's famous letter to King George. Qianlong did not reject the British trade and embassy offers out of ignorance, but as a defensive measure. The Qing world was already beginning to crumble. The emperor wanted to keep the foreign devils away. As we know, that failed.When Cixi started her career as an emperor's consort, the empire was in very deep trouble. The Taiping rebellion, which was probably the bloodiest civil war in world history, was still going strong, and foreigners had also waged war against China, over a trade dispute. They were winning, which enraged the Qing emperors in their downward slide in history. Cixi maneuvered herself into a dominating position behind the weak men on the throne.Some parts of the narration are not really so interesting. For example, we learn in much detail what the lady's hobbies were during her phases of retirement. Even the story how Cixi managed to become a person with power, by a veritable coup d'ÃƒÂ©tat, is a bit of a bore.On the other hand, the consequence was beneficial to China. A relatively long period of peace and prosperity was started, which helped China solve the

Taiping crisis, and brought some modernization and progress. The first quarter century after her coup is considered a success. Then she handed over to her nephew, and things went out of shape.One standard accusation against CX is that she wasted money for the restauration of the Summer Palace, which English and French soldiers had destroyed, and that therefore the navy wasn't able to modernize due to lack of funds, and therefore China lost an important war to Japan, which had serious long term consequences. JC defends CX against this, and puts the blame fully with the new emperor and his advisers, who stopped modernizing the navy due to a lack of strategic insight.Japan started an expansionist move and beat China badly in the war. A ruinous peace was enforced, which was the beginning of the end for the Qing dynasty. The treaty of 1895 had extortionist conditions for indemnities, and took Taiwan away from China. JC holds that CX has been unjustly blamed for the defeat and the financial disaster. The defeat also made other foreign powers greedy, as it showed the extent of China's weakness. Their impertinence enraged CX, which made her sympathize with the Boxers. After the Boxers were beaten, and CX still in place, a decade of unprecedented opening happened, which, however, didn't help Qing dynastic survival. They were foreign rulers, after all.JC tends to ascribe all kinds of good intentions and enlightened views to Cixi. I am not sure about the solidity of her proof, so we are never quite sure if she offers solid facts, or maybe she just puts her own picture into it.JC will also write things like this: Prince Gong's instinctive reaction was this..., but he did that... While this is all quite possibly what happened, we would like to know how the author knows.This is an interesting book, but hardly a definitive biography of Cixi.

When researching Cixi in ordinary historical texts it seems that she is universally vilified as an evil tyrant and blamed for tragedies that befell China during her time in power and even for events after her death. Ask most Chinese about the history of Cixi and one will hear tales of wanton cruelty and self dealing at the expense of China's welfare and security. Empress Dowager credibly and convincingly finally makes the case for the rehabilitation of this much maligned world leader. To understand China today one must understand China's past. The county is made up of the people who only several generations ago were living in the Qing Dynasty. Mao and the recent leaders of China have repeated the errors of the proceedings Qing dynasty that Cixi had recognized were in need of modernization. Isolation from the outside world was one of the errors made by the Emperors. Oppression of women and minorities and xenophobia was another of the errors made by the Emperors. State control of the media was another of the errors. It is a testament to Cixi's leadership and foresight that she recognized the need to bring China out of this dark past and join

the progress of the modern world. This book is a monumental achievement and I highly recommend it.

I have not felt moved to write an online review of a book prior to now, however I feel this work is an exception. I try to research books as well as I can prior to purchasing them in an effort to determine if they are worthy of the time required to read them. Unfortunately in this case my endeavors did not work out as well as I hoped they would. This book is an hagiography of an important historical person who lived around a century ago. I would not pretend to dispute the basic facts as outlined by Ms. Chang. It seems she has had access to, and has done research with, many primary as well as secondary sources of these relatively recent events. I also think that she may have a valid thesis for this book, in that the Empress Dowager Cixi was one of the prominent forces in the late 19th century modernization of China.What I take exception to is the unrelenting messaging that occurs throughout the book, which allows for little introspection on the part of the author or reader. The thesis of Cixi as "reformer" is advanced in practically each paragraph with little evidence of alternate interpretations. For the most part prior interpretations are summarily dismissed without properly developing the details of who, why or when. This is a revisionist text, and as such it should be incumbent on the author to expostulate on the historiography of the subject.My impression as I proceeded through this work was reminiscent of school history texts that presumed to shape understanding without encouraging critical thinking. For this reason I feel It is poorly written, and does not deserve the highly popular rating it is currently enjoying.

An exceptional book about a very remarkable woman who was effectively the ruler of China for nearly half a century. She made her share of mistakes (all rulers do), but on the whole was probably among the smartest and wisest heads of state that China -- or any other country -- has ever had. And yet, because of the revolutionary upheavals in that country she has been largely lost sight of by historians (of which I am one by profession) and, even worse, tarred by all kinds of false accusations. It is true that she did represent a nondemocratic dynasty, but she also moved in her final decade in power to give her country an elected parliament and a western-style constitution. Jung Chang at times becomes a bit too enthusiastic about her subject, who she clearly admires, but on the whole this is a sound piece of historical writing, based on sources that have only been uncovered recently, and the prose is a pleasure to read. It would not be wrong to describe this account of the Empress Dowager as a real page-turner you will not want to put down.

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