Part 2-

Picture from cover of book by Jung Chang

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 慈禧太后

**Empress Dowager Dead at 72**

**By Tracie Pecheny**

**15 November, 1908**- Born to Kuei Hsiang of the Yehenara clan on 29 November, 1835, Lady Yehenara moved to the Forbidden City in 1851 as the Emporer Xianfeng’s concubine. Winning immediate favor with the ruler, she bore him a son in 1856 named Zaichun and earned the title Tzu Hsi (Cixi- Empress of the Western Palace). She is preceded in death by her husband Xianfeng and her son Zaichun-Tongzhi Emporer. Following the death of the Emporer in 1861, Tzu Hsi stepped in for her 5 year old son as the Empress Dowager. Her leadership was wrought with political upheavals, personal tragedies, and suspicion yet she managed to lead China into a new era. Her skills to navigate tricky times and the power and influence she wielded over those within Qing politics, gave her over fifty years of impact on Chinese society. She was the most powerful woman of her era and one of the most influential female leaders of all time.

Speculation into the circumstances of the deaths of many key members of the Qing Dynasty, allowed westerners to dub Cixi the Dragon Lady and she was often vilified yet overlooked as a true leader. As the way of many powerful female leaders like Cleopatra, Cixi’s strong personality and leadership caused the male elite to want to trivialize her contributions while exemplifying her eccentricities. Her intelligence was proven when she first discovered a way to be deemed a Dowager Empress through a 200 year old precedence, since concubines were not eligible to be granted the title. She then forged an alliance with the true Empress Zhen and staged a coup because she knew the men in power would not tolerate their rule. Her next show of creative problem solving was to manipulate a policy to use the royal seal as a method of control for government sanctions. The seal had previously been deemed as only ceremonious, yet by withholding the official stamp, the two women managed to dictate policy. Her methods proved successful and the two empresses ruled together for decades.

Her ability to persuade those in power to form mutually beneficial coalitions, helped establish and maintain the leadership. She would convince through rational persuasion, inspiration, personal appeals, pressure, and favor exchange to form these alliances that would increase her overall power. She did not always make the best political decisions like backing the Boxer Rebellion, but she felt China needed to remain strong or risk domination by the West. Keith Laidler (2003) quotes her as saying,”If we cannot rely on the supernatural formulas, can we not rely upon the heart of the people? China is weak: the only thing we can depend upon is the heart of the people. If we lose that, how can we maintain our country?" She states, “Now they have started the aggression,' she declared, 'and the extinction of our nation is imminent. If we just fold our arms and yield to them, I would have no face to see our ancestors after death. If we must perish, why not fight to the death?” Although this did not endear her to the west, it certainly spoke to her people and China has lost a formidable defender.

The Empress Dowager Cixi was a skilled and influential leader that negotiated difficult curves on a very unstable bridge. She may or may not have killed her husband, her nephew, a competing concubine as well as a number that plotted to kill her or were in consort with any of the above. She may or may not have staged coups and uprisings that destroyed any action against her rule, yet she remained in power. Her ability to rally people behind her and creatively solve problems will forever make her a name in history.

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