VINTAGE

EMPRESS DOWAGER CIXI

JUNG CHANG

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About the Book

Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908) 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 Emperor's numerous concubines and sexual partners. 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 China – 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, telegraph, and an army and navy with up-to-date weaponry. It was she who abolished gruesome punishments like 'death by a thousand cuts' and put an end to foot-binding. She inaugurated women's liberation, and embarked on the path to introduce parliamentary elections to China. Jung 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 Japan – and the invasion

by eight allied powers including Britain, Germany, Russia and the United States. Jung Chang not only records the Empress Dowager's conduct of domestic and foreign affairs, but also takes the reader into the depths of her splendid Summer Palace and the harem of Beijing's Forbidden City, where she lived surrounded by eunuchs – with one of whom she fell in love, with tragic consequences. The world Jung 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Based on newly available, mostly Chinese, historical documents such as court records, official and private correspondence, diaries and eye-witness accounts, this biography will revolutionise historical thinking about a crucial period in China's – and the world's – history. Packed with drama, fastpaced 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 world's population, and as a unique stateswoman.

About the Author

Jung Chang is the bestselling author of *Wild Swans* (1991, which the *Asian Wall Street Journal* called the most read book about China), and *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005, with Jon Halliday), which was described by *Time* magazine as ‘an atom bomb of a book’. Her books have been translated into more than 40 languages and sold more than 15 million copies outside mainland China where they are both banned. She was born in China in 1952, and came to Britain in 1978. She lives in London.

About the Sources

This book is based on historical documents, chiefly Chinese. They include imperial decrees, court records, official communications, personal correspondence, diaries and eye-witness accounts. Most of them have only come to light since the death of Mao in 1976, when historians were able to resume working on the archives. Thanks to their dedicated efforts, huge numbers of files have been sorted, studied, published, some even digitalised. Earlier publications of archive materials and scholarly works have been reissued. Thus I have had the good fortune to be able to utilise a colossal documentary pool, as well as consulting the First Historical Archives of China, the main keeper of the records to do with Empress Dowager Cixi, which holds twelve million documents. The vast majority of the sources cited have never been seen or used outside the Chinese-speaking world.

The Empress Dowager's Western contemporaries left valuable diaries, letters and memoirs. Queen Victoria's diary, Hansard and the copious international diplomatic exchanges are all rich mines of information. The Archives of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, in Washington DC, is the only place that possesses the original negatives of the photographs of Cixi.

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WILD SWANS: THREE DAUGHTERS OF CHINA
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SOUTH CHINA SEA
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0 100 200 300 400 500 mi
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To Jon

EMPRESS DOWAGER CIXI

The Concubine Who Launched Modern China

Jung Chang

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE

The Imperial Concubine in Stormy Times (1835–1861)

1 Concubine to an Emperor (1835–56)

IN SPRING 1852, in one of the periodic nationwide selections for imperial consorts, a sixteen-year-old girl caught the eye of the emperor and was chosen as a concubine. A Chinese emperor was entitled to one empress and as many concubines as he pleased. In the court registry she was entered simply as 'the woman of the Nala family', with no name of her own.[1] Female names were deemed too insignificant to be recorded. In fewer than ten years, however, this girl, whose name may have been lost for ever,[fn1] had fought her way to become the ruler of China, and for decades – until her death in 1908 – would hold in her hands the fate of nearly one-third of the world's population. She was the Empress Dowager Cixi (also spelt Tzu Hsi). This was her honorific name and means 'kindly and joyous'.

She came from one of the oldest and most illustrious Manchu families. The Manchus were a people who originally lived in Manchuria, beyond the Great Wall to the northeast. In 1644, the Ming dynasty in China was overthrown by a peasant rebellion, and the last Ming emperor hanged himself from a tree in the back garden of his palace. The Manchus seized the opportunity to smash across the Great Wall. They defeated the peasant rebels, occupied the whole of China and set up a new dynasty called the Great Qing – 'Great Purity'. Taking over the Ming capital, Beijing, as their own, the victorious Manchus went on to build an empire three times the size of the Ming

empire, at its peak occupying a territory of 13 million square kilometres – compared to 9.6 million today.

The Manchu conquerors, outnumbered by the indigenous Chinese, the Han, by approximately 100:1, imposed their domination initially by brutal means. They forced the Han males to wear the Manchu men's hairstyle as the most visible badge of submission. The Han men traditionally grew their hair long and put it up in a bun, but the Manchu men shaved off an outer ring of hairs, leaving the centre part to grow and plaiting it into a trailing queue. Anyone who refused to wear the queue was summarily beheaded. In the capital, the conquerors pushed the Han out of the Inner City, to the Outer City, and separated the two ethnic groups by walls and gates.[fn2] The repression lessened over the years, and the Han generally came to live a life no worse than that of the Manchus. The ethnic animosity diminished – even though top jobs remained in the hands of the Manchus. Intermarriage was prohibited, which in a family-oriented society meant there was little social intercourse between the two groups. And yet the Manchus adopted much of the Han culture and political system, and their empire's administration, extending to all corners of the country like a colossal octopus, was overwhelmingly manned by Han officials, who were selected from the literati by the traditional Imperial Examinations that focused on Confucian classics. Indeed, Manchu emperors themselves were educated in the Confucian way, and some became greater Confucian scholars than the best of the Han. Thus the Manchus regarded themselves as Chinese, and referred to their empire as the 'Chinese' empire, or 'China', as well as the 'Qing'.

The ruling family, the Aisin-Gioros, produced a succession of able and hard-working emperors, who were absolute monarchs and made all important decisions personally. There was not even a Prime Minister, but only an office of assistants, the Grand Council. The emperors would rise at

the crack of dawn to read reports, hold meetings, receive officials and issue decrees. The reports from all over China were dealt with as soon as they arrived, and rarely was any business left undone for more than a few days. The seat of the throne was the Forbidden City. Perhaps the largest imperial palace complex in the world, this rectangular compound covered an area of 720,000 square metres, with a moat of proportional size. It was surrounded by a majestic wall some 10 metres high and nearly 9 metres thick at the base, with a magnificent gate set into each side, and a splendid watchtower above each corner. Almost all the buildings in the compound displayed glazed tiles in a shade of yellow reserved for the court. In sunshine, the sweeping roofs were a blaze of gold.

A district west of the Forbidden City formed a hub for the transportation of coal, bound for the capital. Brought from the mines west of Beijing, it was carried by caravans of camels and mules, wearing tinkling bells. It was said that some 5,000 camels came into Beijing every day. The caravans paused here, and the porters did their shopping from stores whose names were embroidered on colourful banners or gilded on lacquered plaques. The streets were unpaved, and the soft, powdery dust that lay on top in dry weather would turn into a river of mud after a downpour. There was a pervasive reek from a sewage system that was as antiquated as the city itself. Refuse was simply dumped on the side of the roads, left to the scavenging dogs and birds. After their meals, large numbers of vultures and carrion crows would flock into the Forbidden City, perching on its golden roofs and blackening them.

Away from the hubbub lay a network of quiet, narrow alleys known as *hu-tong*. This is where, on the tenth day of the tenth lunar month in 1835, the future Empress Dowager of China, Cixi, was born. The houses here were spacious, with neatly arranged courtyards, scrupulously tidy and clean, in sharp contrast to the dirty and chaotic

streets. The main rooms had doors and windows open to the south to take in the sun, while the north was walled up to fend off the sandy storms that frequently swept the city. The roofs were covered with grey tiles. The colours of roof tiles were strictly stipulated: yellow for the royal palaces, green for the princes, and grey for all others.

Cixi's family had been government employees for generations.[2] Her father, Huizheng, worked as a secretary and then a section chief for the Ministry of Officials. The family was well-off; her childhood was carefree. As a Manchu, she was spared foot-binding, a Han practice that tortured their women for a millennium by crushing a baby girl's feet and wrapping them tightly to restrict their growth. Most other customs, such as male–female segregation, the Manchus shared with the Han. As a girl of an educated family, Cixi learned to read and write a little Chinese, to draw, to play chess, to embroider and to make dresses – all deemed desirable accomplishments for a young lady. She was a quick and energetic learner and developed a wide range of interests. In the future, when it was the ceremonial duty of the empress dowager, on a certain auspicious day, to cut the pattern for a dress of her own – as a symbol of womanhood – she would perform the task with tremendous competence.

Her education did not include learning the Manchu language, which she neither spoke nor wrote. (When she became the ruler of China, she had to issue an order for reports written in Manchu to be translated into Chinese before she was shown them.) Having been immersed in Chinese culture for 200 years, most Manchus did not speak their own original tongue, even though it was the official language of the dynasty and various emperors had made efforts to preserve it. Cixi's knowledge of written Chinese was rudimentary, and she may be considered 'semi-literate'. This does not mean that she lacked intelligence. The Chinese language is extremely hard to learn. It is the

only major linguistic system in the world that does not have an alphabet; and it is composed of numerous complicated characters – ideograms – which have to be memorised one by one and, moreover, are totally unrelated to sounds. At Cixi's time, written texts were completely divorced from the spoken form, so one could not simply write down what one spoke or thought. To qualify as 'educated', therefore, learners had to spend about a decade in their formative years imbibing Confucian classics, which were severely limited in range and stimulation. Fewer than 1 per cent of the population were able to read or write the bare minimum.

Cixi's lack of formal education was more than made up for by her intuitive intelligence, which she liked to use from her earliest years. In 1843, when she was seven, the empire had just finished its first war with the West, the Opium War, which had been started by Britain in reaction to Beijing clamping down on the illegal opium trade conducted by British merchants. China was defeated and had to pay a hefty indemnity. Desperate for funds, Emperor Daoguang (father of Cixi's future husband) held back the traditional presents for his sons' brides – gold necklaces with corals and pearls – and vetoed elaborate banquets for their weddings.[3] New Year and birthday celebrations were scaled down, even cancelled, and minor royal concubines had to subsidise their reduced allowances by selling their embroidery on the market through eunuchs. The emperor himself even went on surprise raids of his concubines' wardrobes, to check whether they were hiding extravagant clothes against his orders. As part of a determined drive to stamp out theft by officials, an investigation was conducted of the state coffer, which revealed that more than nine million taels of silver had gone missing. Furious, the emperor ordered all the senior keepers and inspectors of the silver reserve for the previous forty-four years to pay fines to make up the loss – whether or not they were guilty.

Cixi's great-grandfather had served as one of the keepers and his share of the fine amounted to 43,200 taels – a colossal sum, next to which his official salary had been a pittance. As he had died a long time ago, his son, Cixi's grandfather, was obliged to pay half the sum, even though he worked in the Ministry of Punishments and had nothing to do with the state coffer. After three years of futile struggle to raise money, he only managed to hand over 1,800 taels, and an edict signed by the emperor confined him to prison, only to be released if and when *his* son, Cixi's father, delivered the balance.

The life of the family was turned upside down. Cixi, then eleven years old, had to take in sewing jobs to earn extra money – which she would remember all her life and would later talk about to her ladies-in-waiting in the court. As she was the eldest of two daughters and three sons, her father discussed the matter with her, and she rose to the occasion. Her ideas were carefully considered and practical: what possessions to sell, what valuables to pawn, whom to turn to for loans and how to approach them. Finally, the family raised 60 per cent of the sum, enough to get her grandfather out of prison. The young Cixi's contribution to solving the crisis became a family legend, and her father paid her the ultimate compliment: 'This daughter of mine is really more like a son!'

Treated like a son, Cixi was able to talk to her father about things that were normally closed areas for women. Inevitably their conversations touched on official business and state affairs, which helped form Cixi's lifelong interest. Being consulted and having her views acted on, she acquired self-confidence and never accepted the common assumption that women's brains were inferior to men's. The crisis also helped shape her future method of rule. Having tasted the bitterness of arbitrary punishment, she would make an effort to be fair to her officials.

As he had raised a sizeable sum of money to pay the fine, Cixi's father, Huizheng, was rewarded in 1849 with an appointment from the emperor to be the governor of a large Mongolian region. That summer he travelled there with his family, setting up home in Hohhot, today's provincial capital of Inner Mongolia. For the first time Cixi journeyed out of crowded Beijing, beyond the decaying Great Wall and along a stony route that led to the Mongolian steppes, where uninterrupted open grassland extended to a very distant horizon. Throughout her life Cixi would feel passionate about fresh air and unrestricted space.

In his new job as governor, Cixi's father was responsible for collecting taxes and, in line with prevailing and age-old practice, he fleeced the local population to make up for the family losses. That he should do so was taken for granted. Officials, who were paid low salaries, were expected to subsidise their income with whatever extras they could make – 'within reason' – from the population at large. Cixi grew up with corruption of this kind as a way of life.

In February 1850, months after the family settled in Mongolia, Emperor Daoguang died and was succeeded by his son, Emperor Xianfeng. The new emperor, then nineteen years old, had been born prematurely and had been in poor health since birth. He had a thin face and melancholy eyes, as well as a limp, the result of a fall from a horse in one of the hunting expeditions that were obligatory for the princes. As an emperor is referred to as a 'dragon', gossips in Beijing nicknamed him 'the Limping Dragon'.[4]

After his coronation, an empire-wide operation began to select consorts for him. (At this point, he had one consort, a concubine.) The candidates, teenage girls, had to be Manchu or Mongol; the Han were excluded. Their families

had to be above a certain rank, and had been obliged by law to register them when they reached puberty.

Cixi was on the list and now, like other girls from all over China, she travelled to Beijing. She settled back into the family's old house and waited for the occasion when all the candidates would parade in front of the emperor. After he had made his pick, some of the girls would be given to the princes and other royal males as consorts. Those who failed to be chosen were free to go home and marry someone else. The inspection in the Forbidden City was scheduled for March 1852.

The procedure for the inspection had been passed down over the generations. On the day before the fixed date, the candidates were taken to the palace in mule-drawn carts – 'taxis' of the day – which were hired by their families and paid for by the court. These carts were like a trunk on two wheels, and were hooded with woven bamboo or rattan that had been soaked in tung-oil to become rain- and snow-proof. Curtains of bright blue were draped over it, and felt and cotton mattresses and cushions were piled inside. This was a common conveyance even for the families of princes, in which case the inside would be lined with fur or satin, depending on the season, while the outside bore markers of its owner's rank. On seeing such a vehicle passing by silently and disappearing into the gathering darkness, Somerset Maugham (later) mused:[5]

> you wonder who it is that sits cross-legged within. Perhaps it is a scholar … bound on a visit to a friend with whom he will exchange elaborate compliments and discuss the golden age of Tang and Sung which can return no more; perhaps it is a singing girl in splendid silks and richly embroidered coat, with jade in her black hair, summoned to a party so that she may sing a little song and exchange elegant repartee with young blades cultured enough to appreciate wit.

The cart that seemed to Maugham to be carrying 'all the mystery of the East' was singularly uncomfortable, as its wooden wheels were secured by wire and nails, without

springs. The occupant was bounced up and down on the dirt-and-stone roads, banging on all sides within. It was particularly challenging for Europeans, who were not used to sitting cross-legged without seats. The grandfather of the Mitford sisters, Algernon Freeman-Mitford, soon to be an attaché in the British Legation in Beijing, remarked: 'After ten hours of a Chinese cart a man is fit for little else than to be sold at an old rag and bone shop.'

Walking at a sedate pace, the carts of the candidates converged outside the back gate of the Royal City, the outer enclosure that cradled the Forbidden City. As the Forbidden City itself was already enormous, this gigantic outer area was similarly encircled by broad crimson-red walls under roof tiles glazed with the same royal yellow colour. It housed temples, offices, warehouses and workshops, with horses and camels and donkeys coming and going, providing services for the court. On this day, at sunset, all activities stopped and a passage was left clear for the carts bearing the candidates, which entered the Royal City in a prescribed order. Passing by the artificial hill Jingshan, and crossing the moat, they arrived outside the north gate to the Forbidden City, the Gate of Divine Prowess, which had an imposing and ornate two-tiered roof over it.

This was the back entrance to the Forbidden City. The front, south gate, was prohibited to women. In fact, the entire front – and main – section was for men only. Constructed for official ceremonies, it consisted of grand halls and vast, empty, stone-paved grounds, with a most noticeable absence: plants. There was virtually no vegetation. This was by design, as plants were thought to convey a feeling of softness, which would diminish the sense of awe: awe for the emperor, the Son of Heaven – 'Heaven' being the mystic and formless ultimate god that the Chinese worshipped. Women had to stay well within the rear part of the Forbidden City, the *hou-gong*, or harem,

where no men were permitted except the emperor, and the eunuchs, who numbered many hundreds.

The potential entrants for the harem now stopped outside the back entrance for the night. Under the towering gate, the carts parked on an enormous paved ground as darkness descended, each lantern casting its own dim circle of light. The candidates would spend the night cooped up in their carts, waiting for the gate to open at dawn. They would then alight and, directed by eunuchs, walk to the hall, where they would be scrutinised by the emperor. Standing before His Majesty, several in a row, they were specifically exempted from performing the obligatory kowtow: going down on their knees and putting their foreheads on the ground. The emperor needed to see them clearly.

Apart from the family name, ‘character’ was a key criterion. The candidates must demonstrate dignity as well as courteousness, graciousness as well as gentleness and modesty – and they must know how to behave in the court. Looks were secondary, but needed to be pleasing. In order for them to show their pure selves, the candidates were not allowed to wear richly coloured clothes: the gowns they wore had to be simple, with just a little embroidery along the hems. Manchu dresses were usually highly decorative. They hung from the shoulders to the floor and were best carried with a straight back. Manchu women’s shoes, daintily embroidered, had the elevation at the centre of the soles, which could be as high as 14 centimetres and compelled them to stand erect. Over their hair, they wore a headdress that was shaped like a cross between a crown and a gate tower, decorated with jewels and flowers when the occasion demanded. On such occasions, a stiff neck was needed to support it.

Cixi was not a great beauty; but she had poise. Though she was short, at just over 1.5 metres, she looked much taller, thanks to the gown, the shoes and the headdress. She sat erect and moved gracefully, even when she was

walking fast, on what some described as ‘stilts’. She was blessed with very fine skin and a pair of delicate hands, which, even in old age, remained as soft as a young girl’s. The American artist who later painted her, Katharine Carl, described her features thus: ‘a high nose … an upper lip of great firmness, a rather large but beautiful mouth with mobile, red lips, which, when parted over her firm white teeth, gave her smile a rare charm; a strong chin, but not of exaggerated firmness and with no marks of obstinacy’.[6] Her most arresting feature was her brilliant and expressive eyes, as many observed. In the coming years during audiences she would give officials the most coaxing look, when suddenly her eyes would flash with fearsome authority. The future – and first – President of China, General Yuan Shikai, who had served under her and had a reputation for being fierce, confessed that her gaze was the only thing that unnerved him: ‘I don’t know why but the sweat just poured out. I just became so nervous.’

Now her eyes conveyed all the right messages, and Emperor Xianfeng took notice. He indicated his liking, and the court officials retained her identification card. Thus being shortlisted, she was subjected to further checks and stayed one night in the Forbidden City. Finally she was chosen, together with several other girls, out of hundreds of candidates. There can be no doubt that this was the future she wanted. Cixi was interested in politics and she had no knight in shining armour awaiting her return. Segregation between male and female precluded any romantic liaison, and the threat of severe punishment for any family who betrothed their daughter without her first having been rejected by the emperor meant that her family could not have made any marital arrangement for her. Although, once admitted to the court, Cixi would rarely see her family, it was officially stipulated that elderly parents of royal consorts could obtain special permission to visit their

daughters, even staying for months in guest houses in a corner of the Forbidden City.

A date was set for Cixi to take up her new home: 26 June 1852. This followed the formal ending of the mandatory two-year mourning for the deceased Emperor Daoguang, signalled by the new emperor visiting his late father's mausoleum west of Beijing. During that mourning period he had been required to abstain from sex. Upon entering the palace, Cixi was given the name *Lan*, which seems to have derived from her surname Nala, which was sometimes written as Nalan. *Lan* was also the name for magnolia or orchid. To name a girl after a flower was a common practice. Cixi did not like the name, and as soon as she was in a position to ask the emperor for a favour, she had it changed.

The harem she entered on that summer day was a world of walled-in courtyards and long, narrow alleyways. Unlike the all-male front section, this quarter had little sense of grandeur, but quite a lot of trees, flowers and rockeries. Here the empress occupied a palace, and each of the concubines had a mini-suite. The rooms were decorated with embroidered silk, carved furniture and bejewelled ornaments, but little display of individual personality was permitted. The harem, like the whole of the Forbidden City, was governed by rigid rules. Exactly what objects the girls could have in their rooms, the quantity and quality of the textiles for their clothes, and the types of food for each day's consumption were meticulously determined in accordance with their rank. For food, an empress had a daily allowance of 13 kilos of meat, one chicken, one duck, ten packages of teas, twelve jars of special water from the Jade Spring Hills, as well as specified amounts of different kinds of vegetables, cereals, spices and other ingredients.[fn3, 7] Her daily allowance also included the milk produced by no fewer than twenty-five cows. (Unlike most

of the Han, the Manchus drank milk and ate dairy products.)

Cixi was not made the empress. She was a concubine, and a low-rank one at that. There were eight rungs on the ladder of imperial consorts, and Cixi was on the sixth, which put her in the lowest group (the sixth to the eighth). At her rank, Cixi had no private cow and was only entitled to 3 kilos of meat a day. She had four personal maids, while the empress had ten, in addition to numerous eunuchs.

The new empress, a girl named Zhen, meaning ‘chastity’, had entered the court with Cixi. She had also started as a concubine, but of a higher rank, the fifth. Within four months and before the end of the year, however, she had been promoted to the first rank: the empress. It was not on account of her beauty, for Empress Zhen was quite plain. She was also of poor physique, and the gossip that had dubbed her husband ‘the Limping Dragon’ named her ‘the Fragile Phoenix’ (phoenix being the symbol of the empress). But she possessed the quality most valued in an empress: she had the personality and skill to get on with the other consorts, and manage them, as well as the servants. An empress’s primary role was to be the manageress of the harem, and Empress Zhen fulfilled this role perfectly. Under her, the harem was remarkably free of the backbiting and malice that were endemic in such places.

There is no evidence that Cixi was favoured as a concubine by her husband. In the Forbidden City the emperor’s sex life was diligently recorded. He picked his sexual partner for the night by marking her name on a bamboo tablet presented to him by the chief eunuch over dinner, which he mostly ate alone. He had two bedrooms, one with mirrors on all sides, and the other with silk screens. The beds were draped with silk curtains, inside which hung scent bags. The bed-curtains in both rooms were lowered when the emperor went into one of them.

This was apparently for reasons of security, so that even intimate servants did not know for certain which bed he went to. Court rules forbade the emperor to sleep in his women's beds. They came to his, and if legend were to be believed, the chosen one was carried over by a eunuch, naked and wrapped in silk. After sex, the woman went away; she was not permitted to stay overnight.

The Limping Dragon loved sex. There are more stories about his sexual activities than about any other Qing emperor. His consorts soon increased to nineteen, some of whom had been elevated from among the palace maids, who were also chosen from all over China, mostly from low-class Manchu families. In addition, women were brought to his bed from outside the court. Rumour had it that most of them were well-known Han prostitutes, who had bound feet – for which he apparently had a penchant. As the Forbidden City had strict rules, they were said to have been smuggled into the Old Summer Palace – the *Yuanming-yuan*, Gardens of Perfect Brightness – a gigantic landscaped complex some 8 kilometres to the west of Beijing. There, the rules were more relaxed, and the emperor could indulge in sexual ventures more freely.

For nearly two years, a sexually active – even frenetic – emperor showed no particular fondness for Cixi. He left her at Rank 6, while elevating those lower in status to her rank. Something put him off her. And it seems that the teenage Cixi, in her eagerness to please her husband, made the mistake of trying to share his worries.

Emperor Xianfeng faced monumental problems.[8] As soon as he ascended the throne, in 1850, the biggest peasant rebellion in Chinese history, the Taiping, broke out in the southern coastal province of Guangxi. There, famine drove tens of thousands of peasants into a desperate last resort – armed rebellion – though they risked the most horrific consequences. For their leaders, the mandatory