

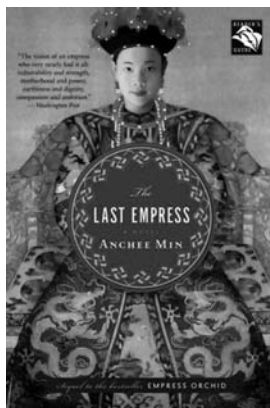
THE LAST EMPRESS

A Novel

BY ANCHEE MIN

BOSTON: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY,
MARINER BOOKS, 2008
336 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0547053707, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Sue Fawn Chung



Novelist Anchee Min, who was born in Shanghai in 1957, wrote an earlier novel, *Orchid*. This book is a continuation of the story of the rise to fame and power of Orchid, who was the Noble Consort to the Xianfeng Emperor (d. 1861) and mother of the Tongzhi Emperor (1856–1875). When her son ascended the throne, she was given the title of the Empress Dowager Cixi, that is, mother of the reigning emperor. She never had the title “empress,” which be-

longed to Xianfeng’s primary wife, who became known as the Empress Dowager Cian, since she shared “motherhood” with Cixi. Nor was Cixi the last empress in China. That title goes to the Puyi Emperor’s wife (1906–1967), the Empress Gabulo Wang Rong (1906–1946), when they were married in 1922.

Nevertheless, this powerful female ruler of China has fascinated people around the world, and the Harvard University catalogue lists 178 books (including translations of works in the original language and republications) on Cixi. From J.O.P. Bland, an Englishman who lived in China under her reign, *Der Ling*, the “princess” who spent two years in the Forbidden City, and Pearl S. Buck, whose novel in 1956 fascinated the Western world, to more recent works, including Marina Warner’s *The Dragon Empress* (1993) and Sterling Seagrave’s, *Dragon Lady* (1992), stories abound about her life. Rumors and truth become intertwined, as Hugh Trevor Roper demonstrated in his *Hermit of Peking*, the story of the hidden life of Sir Edmund Backhouse, a contemporary of Bland, and the probable fabrication of the declaration of war against the foreign powers in the 1900 Boxer uprising.

Min selected her rumors and stories to portray a sympathetic, rather than critical, portrait of Cixi. For example, Min follows the Hugh Trevor Roper line that pressure from certain members of the imperial family led to the court sanctioning the Boxers. Instead of subscribing to the tale that she threw the Pearl Concubine into the well as they fled the Imperial Palace, she adopted the story that the Pearl Concubine committed suicide. The book abounds with historical errors, such as “In 1921, backed by Soviet Communists, Mao Tse-tung . . . founded . . . the Communist Party of China.” (313) Mao was simply a student follower; his mentor, Li Dazhao, with Chen Duxiu, were co-founders of the Party. After the 1898 Reform Movement’s failure, it was the British,

not French doctor, who declared that the Guangxu Emperor had Bright’s disease (nephritis). Her mixed use of transliteration systems, especially in the names of individuals and place names, “Hepei” for example, instead of Hebei (214), are very disturbing to anyone who knows Chinese. Little misconceptions are irritating, as well, such as naming a parrot “Confucius,” which the Chinese would never allow and even a Manchu woman would not do. Court etiquette also has not been described correctly.

Min’s novel “The Last Empress” brings to life the story of the last powerful female ruler of China, Cixi (1835–1908), with a sympathetic perspective, interwoven with the intrigues and political machinations of court life. High school students and undergraduate survey level students will be fascinated by the story, despite some of the historical inaccuracies, and hopefully the novel will prompt them to read more on Chinese history. The novel is entertaining and gives some feeling for what it was like for a Manchu woman to rule China, with all its various political factions, in a time of crisis and decline. Like her contemporary, Queen Victoria of England, Cixi has fascinated an international audience and this novel reinvigorates this interest. ■

SUE FAWN CHUNG received her master’s from Harvard University, and her doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley, where her dissertation focused upon the Empress Dowager Cixi. She began teaching at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 1975, and has served as Director of International Programs and Department Chair. She currently is a member of the Board of Advisors of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Board of Museums and History for the State of Nevada.

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