

SACE Board of South Australia

Sources sheet to accompany the 2017 Modern History paper

Empress Dowager Cixi

The Empress Dowager¹ Cixi (1835–1908) was the unofficial ruler of China's Qing dynasty from her husband's death in 1861 to her death in 1908. Her attempts to modernise China, and her interactions with Western nations, resulted in many differing views of her motives, actions, and legacy.

¹ Emperor's mother

SOURCE 1 — An extract from the memoirs of a personal attendant to Cixi, from her time at the royal court, first published in 1911

I had been told that Her Majesty [Cixi] had a very fierce temper, but seeing her so kind and gracious to us and talking to us in such a motherly way, I thought my informant must be wrong and that she was the sweetest woman in the world.

When Her Majesty had rested a while, she told us that it was time we were returning to the city, as it was getting late. She gave us eight big yellow boxes

of fruit and cakes to take home with us. She said to my mother: "Tell Yu Keng (my father) to get better soon and tell him to take the medicine I am sending by you and to rest well. Also give him these eight boxes of fruit and cakes." I thought my father, who had been quite ill ... would not be much benefited if he ate all those cakes. However, I knew he would appreciate her kind thoughtfulness even if it were detrimental to his health.

The Princess Der Ling 2008, *Two years in the Forbidden City*, Project Gutenberg, p 43, <https://terebess.hu/english/princess1.html>, viewed 11 April 2017

SOURCE 2 — An extract about Cixi from a British magazine

The empress usually put her own interests ahead of the nation's. She squandered money on banquets, jewels, and other luxuries. She liked, for example, to be served 150 different dishes at a single banquet. She drank from a jade cup and ate with golden chopsticks. She used Navy funds to build herself a lavish summer palace. At the end of her life, her personal jewellery vault held 3,000 ebony boxes of jewels. She also let financial corruption run rampant ...

Sit, T 2001, 'The life of Empress Cixi', *China in focus*, www.sacu.org/cixi.html, viewed 11 April 2017, © Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding

SOURCE 3 — A description of Cixi from an art exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute

During her reign, the Qing court came to be regarded as conservative, corrupt, and incompetent. The situation worsened after ... 1900, when Cixi was accused of encouraging the killing of foreigners and Chinese Christians. Her reputation plummeted in China and worldwide.

In response, the Qing court initiated measures to improve the Empress Dowager's image. Along with inviting foreign visitors to receptions at the palace, these efforts included arranging for a series of photographic portraits of Cixi, some of which were presented as diplomatic gifts.

'Powerplay: China's Empress Dowager', 2011, Arthur M Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, www.asia.si.edu/explore/china/powerplay, viewed 11 April 2017, © Smithsonian Institute

SOURCE 4 — A view of Cixi by an American art expert

The manipulated Cixi portrait reveals more than the desire to glamorize a 70-year-old ruler ... Indeed, an argument can be made that the portraits were part of a strategic calculation to develop international ties to effect diplomatic objectives ... In addition to the ... portrait, Roosevelt's² daughter Alice (1884–1980) received a smaller portrait when she visited Beijing in 1905 ... Naturally, the newspapers made much of this symbolic clash of civilizations. As *The Washington Times* quipped, "It well may be that the visit of this young American girl will have its effect on the terrible old woman who rules China, and that it will help along the improvement of the great empire."

² Theodore Roosevelt, United States President from 1901–1909

Hogge, D 2011, 'The Empress Dowager and the camera, photographing Cixi, 1903–1904', p 28, <https://ocw.mit.edu>, viewed 11 May 2017, © Visualizing Cultures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

when answering Question 45.

SOURCE 5 — Photographs of Empress Dowager Cixi, 1903–04

Source 5(a): An official photograph of Cixi



'Powerplay: China's Empress Dowager', 2011, Arthur M Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institute, www.asia.si.edu/explore/china/powerplay, viewed 11 April 2017, © Smithsonian Institute

Source 5(b): A colourised photograph that was enhanced to make Cixi look younger. Cixi sent a copy to US President Theodore Roosevelt



Hogge, D 2011, 'The Empress Dowager and the camera, photographing Cixi, 1903–1904', p 26, <https://ocw.mit.edu>, viewed 11 May 2017, © Visualizing Cultures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

SOURCE 6 — A view of Cixi's achievements between 1902 and 1908 by a current, Chinese-born British writer

Modernisation enabled the country's annual revenue to more than double in this period, from just over 100 million taels³ to 235 million. And as revenues grew, so it became possible to fund further rounds of modernisation. The reforms in these years were radical, progressive and humane, designed to improve people's lives and eradicate medieval savagery. Under her measured stewardship, Chinese society was fundamentally transformed, thoughtfully and bloodlessly, for the better, while its roots were carefully preserved and suffered minimum trauma.

³ Chinese currency