

## HISTORY This Week EP 425: A Concubine Rises to Rule China

### EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

*NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.*

**Sally Helm:** HISTORY This Week. April 27, 1856. I'm Sally Helm.

There's a pregnancy in the imperial palaces of Beijing's Forbidden City, and preparations have been underway for months. Not because of the mother: she's a low-ranking concubine named Cixi. But because of the father: Qing Emperor Xianfeng.

He's a sickly man who has not yet produced a son. So, he and the royal court have done everything they can think of to ensure the birth of a healthy boy, who will one day be the leader of the Qing dynasty. Cixi's mother has been summoned to the Forbidden City to care for her daughter. The court astrologer is leaving nothing to chance. He's arranged for a ceremony to be held behind the concubine Cixi's apartment. Someone has dug a hole in the ground and placed inside a pair of chopsticks wrapped in red silk. The word for chopsticks sounds similar to the phrase, "to produce a son quickly."

And today... April 27... it all pays off. Cixi gives birth to a baby boy. The emperor finally has an heir.

The birth also changes Cixi's fortunes. Dramatically. As the mother of the emperor's only son, she's immediately awarded a higher rank. In the list of imperial women at the Forbidden City, Cixi is now second only to the empress.

Harmony reigns.

But... this is the imperial court. The top prize is ultimate power. So that harmony will not last forever. By the time this baby boy is five and a half years old, his father will be dead. And his mother will be plotting a coup.

Today: The Empress Dowager Cixi. How did a low-ranking concubine rise to power, and end up serving a fifty-year reign at the head of China's last dynasty?

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** The Forbidden City, 1852. Outside the back gate of this 178-acre palace, there's a line of wooden carts. Hundreds of them. Each decked out with blue silk drapery. Inside each cart is a sleeping teenage girl. And beyond the gates of that palace is the man they've come here to see. Chinese Emperor Xianfeng. Who, at twenty-one years old, is finally ready to choose his royal consorts.

Professor Ying-chen Peng told us, girls from all around China have been called to Beijing to present themselves, as part of a massive selection ceremony.

**Ying-chen Peng:** It was a ritual that was held every two years. The scale was just mind blowing because all the single Manchu teenage girls had to be presented to the court.

**Sally Helm:** One of these girls is a 16-year-old who will come to be known as Cixi.

We don't actually know her birth name—that was only recorded for boys. She'd grown up in the maze-like districts around the Forbidden City. At this time, the Han are the majority in China. They emphasize Confucian principles, like higher learning... for men. But Cixi, and the emperor, are Manchu—an ethnic minority that makes up the Qing dynasty's ruling elite. Manchu girls like Cixi are allowed some education.

**Ying-chen Peng:** The Manchus were more respectful, about women's rights. They could actually inherit the property of their deceased husbands or their fathers. And they did not have to bind their feet. They had more say in the family.

**Sally Helm:** Cixi's family was fairly well off, and she'd been allowed some say in family matters. She's intelligent and confident. Which she's going to need when, at first light, the palace gates open. And Cixi, along with noble Manchu and Mongol girls from around China, is called before the young emperor.

Cixi and the other girls enter a hall in the palace harem. They're dressed in simple gowns. While the emperor Xianfeng sits in judgment on an ornate throne.

**Ying-chen Peng:** For those good looking or those with a special talent, they would be kept in the court for a couple of years. And among them, the lucky few would be favored by the emperor and received their first formal title as the emperor's concubine.

**Sally Helm:** The girls have just a few moments to make an impression. They're supposed to show beauty, grace, class, brains—all while standing in front of the emperor.

And some girls don't cut it. They're sent home to their regular lives. They can marry someone else. But Cixi is one of those chosen to stay. She's not a royal concubine... but she has a foothold inside the Forbidden City.

And with that, she has just moved *much* closer to the center of Chinese political life. Emperor Xianfeng is trying to maintain the strength of the Qing dynasty. Which, remember, is ruled by Manchus. The ethnic minority. Previous dynasties have mostly been Han. And author Jung Chang told us, at this moment, in 1852... things aren't exactly going well for the emperor.

**Jung Chang:** The emperor was in trouble at the time you know, there were foreign invasions, there were peasant uprisings, and the dynasty was really wobbly.

**Sally Helm:** China is only recently, and tentatively, coming out of a long period of isolation. They're responding to Western powers who have been beating down their doors, demanding access to trade. China has recently also fought, and lost, a war against the British. And the Qing dynasty is facing internal divisions: anti-Manchu rebellions, and uprisings.

It's a lot to deal with. The situation really demands a statesman. But Emperor Xianfeng...

**Jung Chang:** Was not a statesman. If he had been given the choice, he probably would not have wanted to be the emperor. He was basically an artist. He painted quite beautifully. And, what he really loved was Chinese opera.

**Sally Helm:** The emperor is preoccupied with the arts. Cixi takes note. She knows that she needs to stand out to have any chance of being promoted to royal concubine, which would allow her to remain at court. And so, Dr. Peng says, Cixi gives the emperor what he likes... art.

**Ying-chen Peng:** She once painted a painting, and Xianfeng seemed to be very happy with that painting and even ordered his eunuch to mount the painting.

**Sally Helm:** And he loved painting. So that was a big deal for him.

**Ying-chen Peng:** Exactly, so you can say that Cixi was a very clever girl. She knew how to please the emperor, and she also knew her strength very well.

**Sally Helm:** It works. Emperor Xianfeng officially chooses Cixi as a royal concubine in the Forbidden City. But... she's sorted into the lowest-ranking group of consorts.

**Jung Chang:** Cixi for many years remained a lowly concubine.

**Sally Helm:** Jung Chang speculates that Cixi might've done something to earn the emperor's disfavor. She might have tried to involve herself in politics.

**Jung Chang:** Cixi thought she loved the emperor, her husband, and was trying to give him advice. But this only annoyed the emperor because women were not supposed to be involved in politics in court. And so, the emperor didn't promote her to a higher rank of the concubine.

**Sally Helm:** Instead, he promotes a woman named Cian. Cian and Cixi know each other well.

**Jung Chang:** They went into court together in the same group.

**Sally Helm:** They'd been in blue-curtained carts outside the palace gates on that same momentous night. But Cian quickly outstrips Cixi. She becomes the highest-ranking consort, which makes her the empress. She gets more servants. More food. And more time with the emperor.

**Jung Chang:** It was not because she was particularly beautiful. It was not because she was particularly energetic, but because she had the quality to make peace in the court, to administer the court. That was the job of the empress.

**Sally Helm:** Cian is magnanimous towards the other consorts, including Cixi. Both women are ultimately at court for the same reason. Once all 17 consorts are in place, the emperor begins calling them one by one to his bedroom. To produce a healthy son who would continue the Qing dynasty. The court anxiously awaits the results... and to everyone's surprise, the big news comes from Cixi.

She's the second consort to be pregnant by the emperor. The first gave birth to a girl. So, there is rejoicing when Cixi gives birth in 1856, to a boy. His name is Tongzhi. And as the mother of the emperor's son, Cixi gets promoted.

**Ying-chen Peng:** Very quickly she advanced to the second rank when she was only 22 years old.

**Sally Helm:** Cixi is now the second most important woman in all of China. But Dr. Peng says, when it comes to baby Tongzhi, the first most important woman in China, Empress Cian, is very much a part of the picture.

**Ying-chen Peng:** Per the Manchu law, she was the foster mother of Tongzhi because she was the empress.

**Sally Helm:** Cixi and Cian are kind of like co-parents. Dr. Peng says they took different roles. Cian was caring. Cixi was tough.

**Ying-chen Peng:** She hired the best scholars to be his tutor. And she interrogated those tutors constantly wanting to check on the progress of Tongzhi's learning.

**Sally Helm:** The boy might need to learn fast. His father, Emperor Xianfeng, is in his late twenties. But he's not doing well. He's been sickly since birth—his frailty has earned him the nickname “limping dragon.” In winter, he shivers through his days in the cold palace. In the warmer months, he spends time at his vast summer palace on the outskirts of Beijing, listening to opera and trying to ignore the increasingly chaotic world outside.

In 1860, the British and the French invade China to force a further opening of trade. Emperor Xianfeng resists. He and his advisors believe that submitting to what these foreign powers want would weaken China. They end up torturing some captured British officials. And in response, Jung Chang says, the British burn the beautiful summer palace.

**Jung Chang:** The court fled to the north. And Emperor Xianfeng was heartbroken. He didn't want to go back to Beijing to see this burnt-out summer palace.

**Sally Helm:** In the north, his health worsens. He coughs up blood and loses consciousness at unexpected moments. By 1861 he can barely leave his private rooms. So, they become his office.

**Ying-chen Peng:** Because of this arrangement, Cixi had the opportunity of helping Xianfeng with his work.

**Sally Helm:** Dr. Peng says that the emperor asks Cixi to begin reading and writing official communications. He had once demoted her, perhaps for offering political advice. Now she's by his side as he conducts imperial business.

**Ying-chen Peng:** This was already a very big deal because in Chinese tradition, women were forbidden from participating in any form of politics, and Xianfeng definitely knew that.

**Sally Helm:** But he relies on her help. Or maybe he's just too weak to put up his usual resistance. Soon, he's bedridden. Which means that Cixi takes on an even greater role in politics.

This change is not lost on the emperor's advisors, who are working closely with him on these crucial

policies. Especially whether, and how much, China should open to the West. They believe it shouldn't. And they're not happy that the dying emperor has brought this female interloper into such sensitive discussions.

**Ying-chen Peng:** During his last days, all these men agreed that Cixi was clever, but she was also dangerous.

**Sally Helm:** The advisors take their concerns to Emperor Xianfeng. *She's a woman*, they say. *She should have never gotten involved in politics*. And they're also fixated on the transition of power that will happen when the emperor dies. His son Tongzhi is only 5 years old. He'll have to wait 11 years before he can officially rule. And during that time, he'll need a regent to act for him.

The advisors try to block Cixi by ensuring that one of their own will become the regent—not her. They say, *She's too cunning, too ambitious*. The emperor agrees. And he makes a plan for what will happen after his death.

**Ying-chen Peng:** What he arranged was a very subtle balancing of power.

**Sally Helm:** He appoints not one, but *eight* of his advisors to act as regents for the young Tongzhi.

**Ying-chen Peng:** All the edicts would be drafted by these eight advisors.

**Sally Helm:** Which means that no one man can become too powerful. And the emperor adds another check and balance:

**Ying-chen Peng:** These edicts would not become valid unless they bore two seals.

**Sally Helm:** These seals bear the Emperor's insignia. They can be used as literal seals of approval on official edicts. Or as vetoes. They carry a lot of power. So, the question becomes: when the emperor dies, who will hold these seals? Xianfeng makes his decision. He loops in one woman that he trusts. Not Cixi... but Cian.

**Ying-chen Peng:** One seal would be kept by Cian, the other would be held by the young emperor.

**Sally Helm:** But neither of those is Cixi. Right? So, one of them is Cian and the other is the emperor himself, the young five-year-old emperor?

**Ying-chen Peng:** Yeah. That's the tricky part. So, who's gonna hold that seal for him? Right. He was only five years old, so that definitely gave Cixi the opportunity to plot something.

**Sally Helm:** Emperor Xianfeng suspects that she might start plotting. And so, he goes to the Empress Cian. Jung Chang says there's a famous story about what happens next. He tells her: if Cixi tries to grab political influence, you can take drastic measures.

**Jung Chang:** The emperor actually also said to the empress and gave the empress an edict which said that if after I die, she goes on doing this, you can show this edict. And have her killed.

**Sally Helm:** In the autumn of 1861, Emperor Xianfeng dies. In the Northern wilderness. Without ever having returned to see the shell of the summer palace where he loved to watch opera and paint.

By this time, Cixi has been privy to the workings of China's imperial government for nearly a decade. And she has some opinions about policy. About the direction of the country. But... she has no formal say in any of that. Still, the new emperor Tongzhi is her son. She knows that she might be able to wield power through him. What she doesn't know is just how dangerous that might be. Because her co-parent, the Empress Cian holds the emperor's last secret edict. At any time, she can have Cixi killed.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Autumn, 1861. News of Emperor Xianfeng's death spreads throughout China. The direction of the country is now in the hands of the eight regents. The same men who had advised the late emperor to close China off to the world. Now they're telling Tongzhi, the young emperor-in-waiting, that it's better to make no deals with the Western powers at China's doorstep. Better to keep them at bay by force.

But Cixi feels very differently. She thinks this is one of the policies that is weakening the Qing dynasty.

**Jung Chang:** Cixi knew that if they continued to give the same advice to her son, China would keep on suffering defeat.

**Sally Helm:** Defeats like the burning of the summer palace. She thinks that the country will be weaker if they continue to forgo diplomacy and trade.

**Jung Chang:** She could see that the Chinese empire was in trouble because of the wrong policies.

**Sally Helm:** Cixi believes that now is the time to increase China's trade with the West... slowly, and on favorable terms. But to make that happen, she'll need an ally.

So... Cixi approaches Cian. This woman who started as a fellow teenaged concubine. And Cixi lays out for her a program of modern reform. One that would encourage strategic contact with the West. Then Cixi makes a bold proposal. *Make me co-empress with you. Together, we'll stand up to these regents.*

It's exactly the kind of moment that the late emperor's last edict was designed for. Cian could, with a snap of her fingers, produce that edict and sentence her former rival to death. But that's not what she does.

**Jung Chang:** She agreed with Cixi's vision for the future.

**Sally Helm:** Not only that. Cian agrees to Cixi's proposal. Soon enough, the two become the Co-Dowager Empresses of China.

The regents accept the women's ceremonial roles but keep them shut out of politics. So Cixi raises the stakes. She approaches Cian with another proposal. *Work with me*, she says. *To rid China of these regents... and lead it into the future.*

It's breath-takingly risky. She's talking about deposing the most powerful men in the empire. And again, Cian has an easy way out. She can pull out the edict. And... she does. Cian shows Cixi the document that

can end her life.

**Jung Chang:** She showed this piece of edict to Cixi... and then burned it.

**Sally Helm:** This crucial piece of leverage. She tosses it into the flames. Jung Chang says Cian reveals herself in this moment:

**Jung Chang:** She had guts. And she also had brains.

**Sally Helm:** With the edict destroyed, Cixi and Cian are officially a two-woman rebellion.

**Jung Chang:** Two women, both in their twenties. I think they took advantage of the fact that the officials didn't think much of them because they were women.

**Sally Helm:** Chang imagines the women quietly plotting as they stroll through the palace gardens. Sitting near the koi pond. Lounging in the shade of a ginkgo tree.

**Jung Chang:** People assumed they were just doing girl stuff, but in fact they were plotting a coup for this country, which then had a third of the population in the world.

**Sally Helm:** Plotting a coup. A move that Cixi and Cian must keep secret.

**Jung Chang:** If the coup failed, the punishment would have been death by a thousand cuts. You would be cut to death, alive, knife after knife. I mean, they were afraid of that.

**Sally Helm:** If the coup is going to work, the women will need allies. Especially the officials who control the palace guard. So, they come up with a plan. They have a court official propose that the empress should serve as Tongzhi's regent.

**Ying-chen Peng:** That proposal was immediately turned down by the eight advisors.

**Sally Helm:** Dr. Peng says, Cixi and Cian never actually thought the proposal would go through. It was just a way to gather intelligence. Observing the reaction. Seeing: who is an enemy? And who might be a potential friend?

**Ying-chen Peng:** That plan was very clever in the sense that it gave the two women an opportunity to see who could be the potential alliance in the court because, during the process of debate, you had voices from both sides, right?

**Sally Helm:** Some members of the court did argue in favor of this change. And afterwards, the women quietly approach them to gain their support. Then, they move on to the next stage of their plan.

**Ying-chen Peng:** The second step of the coup was to create this kind of opinion in the court about how the eight advisors were acting dominantly, not showing the due respect to the young Emperor.

**Sally Helm:** They have to provoke this sense that the regents are overstepping. So, one day, when Cixi and Cian are caring for the young Tongzhi, they lure the regents into a room with them. Then they pick a

fight. Needling the men. Until... the regents are yelling and stomping around in anger. Create a loud scene. So loud that the child emperor Tongzhi wakes up and starts crying.

Tongzhi may have been just a kid, but he's still the emperor. The most respected official in all of China. Upsetting him, as the regents have just done, is a grave offense.

Cixi makes sure that everyone knows about it. She writes an edict condemning the regents' behavior. And: calling for their removal from power. She says they should be arrested. Her allies in the court agree... and the palace guards take the regents into custody.

The coup is almost complete. The dowager empresses begin writing royal edicts—and making them official with Emperor Xianfeng's seals. They hold the power now. And to solidify it, as the last stage in their coup, they decide to get rid of the eight regents altogether. Cixi issues a series of orders.

**Jung Chang:** Out of the eight co-regents. She sentenced the one man to death, public execution, and ordered two others to commit suicide by sending them each a long white silk scarf to hang themselves with.

**Sally Helm:** Of the regents not sentenced to death...

**Jung Chang:** A few co-regents were dismissed, one was sent into exile, but there was no otherwise upheaval.

**Sally Helm:** Jung Chang says that by the standards of the time, taking power with only three deaths is pretty restrained. Cixi doesn't go mad with revenge—five of the eight regents are left alive. But in the palace, the two women are in charge.

**Jung Chang:** The division of work was very interesting.

**Sally Helm:** After the coup, Cixi takes on the daily administrative tasks of the court. And Cixi controls foreign policy. She controls all major government decisions—on behalf of her son, of course.

**Jung Chang:** When she first took power, she was not even supposed to see her officials face to face. She had to sit behind a screen. In front of the screen there was a chair for the child emperor, and she was sitting behind the screen.

**Sally Helm:** But the pre-teen Tongzhi shows little interest in ruling. Professor Peng says he has no knack for it.

**Ying-chen Peng:** Tongzhi was definitely not fit to be an emperor just like his father, right? So, we can't really comment on him as an emperor because he did so little.

**Sally Helm:** The person really calling the shots at the top of the Qing empire is Cixi. Who was once the bottom-tier concubine. She authorizes small steps toward the West, like opening foreign language schools and expanding Shanghai's trading port. Meanwhile, the passage of time is moving Tongzhi toward the



throne. He comes of age at 16, which means Cixi must retire as his regent. But just before Tongzhi turns 19...

**Ying-chen Peng:** He died prematurely in 1875. He died of smallpox.

**Sally Helm:** Emperor Tongzhi dies without an heir. Leaving a power vacuum that Cixi rushes to fill. She adopts her 3-year-old nephew, installs him on the throne, and becomes his regent. Jung Chang says, it's at this point that Cixi begins to pursue a policy she's long favored. Of more fully introducing China to the world.

**Jung Chang:** China had been isolated, had self-imposed the isolation and closed its door about a hundred years ago. She then asks a question, why can't we open the door and have trade with the west and benefit our country?

**Sally Helm:** She also launches an ambitious program of industrial development.

**Jung Chang:** She introduced railways, telegraphs, telegrams, modern Army and Navy and opened mines, building factories, sending ambassadors abroad, established diplomatic relations with the West, foreign trade, you know, everything.

**Sally Helm:** When her nephew comes of age in 1889, Cixi officially retires as regent again. But she's still consulted on all important government matters. In fact, Cixi leads or advises China's final dynasty until her death in 1908—a period of nearly fifty years. Those years see enormous change. The end of China's ancient civil service exam, an official foreign affairs office, a new constitution, and China's first popular election. Cixi has a hand in all of it.

Today... her legacy is still very much debated. Some see her as greedy. Despotic. The Chinese Communists who came after her, and who still rule the country, see her as a pawn of the Western imperial powers. Others say she's a scapegoat—blamed for all of the Qing dynasty's problems despite the decades of misrule that preceded her.

**Jung Chang:** She had been maligned for more than a hundred years and is still maligned today. I mean, nearly all the Chinese still think of her as this evil, wicked woman who was responsible for dragging China behind for, you know, the problems the old China had.

**Sally Helm:** Dr. Peng says, Cixi was in power so long. She oversaw so much change. That it's hard to boil her down to just one thing.

**Ying-chen Peng:** Looking at Cixi or any complicated historical figure is like looking through a kaleidoscope. If you turn your angle, then you have a completely different picture.

**Sally Helm:** Cixi herself tried to control her image throughout her life. And you can't separate that from the fact that she was a woman in a man's role. She upended the extremely restricted view of what women were, and are, capable of. And when she died, that is the symbol that she wanted on the outside of her tomb.

**Ying-chen Peng:** From the outside you see a lot of decorations of phoenix flying here and there on the column, or on the floor. The phoenix is a symbol of female power in Chinese symbolism.

**Sally Helm:** But inside, Cixi gave expression to something else. The part of her that was unapologetically in charge. At times, ruthless. She made herself one of the most powerful people in the world. Even if she began her rule from behind a curtain. And inside her tomb: you can see *that* Cixi.

**Ying-chen Peng:** It was decorated by hundreds of Golden dragons, the symbol of monarchy. She had the ability, but I feel that she kept that ambition of becoming a true monarch in her heart.

[CREDITS]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, [HistoryThisWeek@History.com](mailto:HistoryThisWeek@History.com), or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests: Jung Chang, author of *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* and Professor Ying-chen Peng, author of *Artful Subversion: Empress Dowager Cixi's Image Making in Art*.

This episode was produced by Corinne Wallace and co-produced by Morgan Givens. Sound designed by Brian Flood, and story edited by Jim O'Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

Don't forget to subscribe, rate, and review HISTORY This Week wherever you get your podcasts, and we'll see you next week!