

OBJECT IN FOCUS

The Empress Dowager Cixi with foreign envoys' wives



Photography of Cixi (1835–1908),
Empress Dowager of China

Photographer: Xunling 1874–1943

China, Beijing, Yihe Yuan 颐和园,
Leshoutang 乐寿堂

Qing dynasty, 1903–05

Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives,
FSA A.13 SC-GR-249

Describe

This is an iconic photo of Cixi (1835–1908), the Empress Dowager of Qing China (1644–1911), in the early 1900s. It was taken in the Hall of Happiness and Longevity (Leshou tang) in the Summer Palace, Beijing. Cixi sits at the center. Behind her is a banner that says “Long Live the Current Divine Mother Empress Dowager of the Great Qing Empire for Ten Thousand Years.” Her embroidered robe is covered with stylized longevity characters and chrysanthemums, a symbol for long life. The auspicious emblems signify the wish of longevity for herself and, by extension, for the Qing dynasty. Standing around her are the wives of foreign envoys. The woman holding Cixi’s hand is Sarah Pike Conger (ca. 1843–1932), wife of the American diplomat to Beijing. Conger spoke highly of Cixi’s many virtues in newspaper articles and books. Their holding hands is a gesture of friendship. Each of the foreign women holds a folding fan and wears a bottle gourd pendant (a symbol of fortune and prosperity). These are probably gifts from Cixi. They signify good relationships between the Qing court and the respective countries that these women are from.

Analyze

Cixi is a contradictory figure in Chinese history. From the 1860s until her death in 1908, Cixi dominated the Qing court and policies. She was regent to two successive emperors. Powerful as she was, she did not have a good reputation abroad. During her reign, foreigners and some of Cixi’s countrymen considered the Qing court to be conservative, corrupt, and incompetent. Her reputation was worsened among westerners after the Yihetuan Movement of 1900 (also known as Boxer Rebellion), an anti-imperialist, anti-foreign, and anti-Christian uprising. Cixi supported the group and declared war on the foreign powers. In response, a foreign joint army was sent to Beijing and Cixi was forced to flee the capital. After she returned to Beijing in 1902, she changed course and initiated massive reforms. She also took advice

from key reformers. These new policies included promoting railroads, founding modern schools, and sending students to study overseas. Cixi also attempted to improve her international image. For example, she would invite the wives of foreign diplomats to receptions at the palace, as shown in this picture.

Interpret

The picture belongs to the only photographic series taken of Cixi. They were shot by a young aristocratic photographer named Xunling (ca. 1880–1943) between 1903 and 1904. The photographs were meant to be used to restore Cixi's public image. They were designed to convey imperial authority and aesthetic elegance. Some of the photographs were presented as diplomatic gifts, including one for US President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919).

Inquire

- Research the causes and effects of the Boxer Rebellion and Empress Cixi's role in it.
- Imagine you are one of the people in this photograph. What are you thinking? How do you feel about having your picture taken? Write a monologue in the first person.
- Compare and contrast Empress Cixi's regalia with the clothing of the envoys' wives.

Resources

View this image online at <https://sova.si.edu/details/FSA.A.13#ref7>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>



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