

CHINA
UNDER THE
EMPRESS
DOWAGER

THE HISTORY OF THE LIFE AND TIMES OF TZU HSI

J.O.P. Bland
Edmund Backhouse

EARNSHAW
BOOKS

FOREWORD

BY DEREK SANDHAUS

RARELY has a book on Chinese history captured the popular imagination like J.O.P Bland and Edmund Backhouse's *China under the Empress Dowager*. This unique look inside the scintillating and treacherous court life of China's last great despot, the Empress Dowager Cixi, appeared at just the right moment in history. In 1910, ten years after the Boxer Rebellion and two years after the death of Cixi, the Chinese Empire was on the verge of collapse and all eyes were on China. At a time when readers were hungry for news of the Middle Kingdom, this book gave them all that and more, providing a fresh perspective on China's previous fifty years with thrilling anecdotes from the court and newly translated first-hand accounts. Most amazing of all, the book featured the never-before-seen diary of a well-connected Manchu official, Ching Shan, providing an insider's perspective on the mysterious machinations of the court during the Boxer Rebellion.

But the story behind the book is equally captivating. John Otway Percy Bland, at the time of publication the more famous of the two authors, arrived in Shanghai in 1883. The Irish scholar had been recruited directly from Trinity College to work in the Imperial Maritime Customs Service under Sir Robert Hart, a position he held until 1896. During this time he rose to official rank in the Chinese government, gained fluency in the Chinese language and amassed a wealth of powerful connections. In 1897, now a member of Shanghai's Municipal Council, he accepted the

position of Shanghai correspondent for *The Times* of London, and it was in this capacity that he came in contact with a rising star of Chinese scholarship, Edmund Trelawny Backhouse.

Backhouse was, by many accounts, a thoroughly strange yet endearing personality. He had arrived in Peking in 1898 as an Oxford dropout with a knack for languages. He chose to live outside of the foreign compound among the Chinese, shunning the company of other Europeans but allegedly amassing powerful Chinese and Manchu contacts. Within a year of arrival, he had become one of the most respected translators and informants in China, counting among his patrons the British Foreign Service, the Imperial Maritimes Customs Service and Dr. G.E. Morrison, the Peking correspondent of *The Times*. In 1899, Morrison introduced the two authors, sending a dog-bite wounded Backhouse to stay with Bland while seeking medical attention in Shanghai.

The two men hit it off right away. At first glance Bland, the outgoing sportsman, and Backhouse, the introverted scholar, were an odd pair, but they had much in common. Both shared a deeply rooted respect for their adopted country and its people, and sought to correct Western misconceptions of China. Morrison, meanwhile, spoke no Chinese and had an unflinchingly colonialist outlook which they both despised. Their mutual disdain for the Australian Anglophile provided another strand to their friendship.

In November 1908, Bland was covering all of China for *The Times* while Morrison was on vacation, and was consequently handed the biggest story of his career: the deaths of both the Empress and Emperor within a day of each other. At a bit of a loss, he turned to the well-informed Backhouse for assistance. Backhouse was able to provide all of the raw material and relevant cultural context for the obituary, while Bland was able to lend structure and a more polished style. The article was a great success, and shortly afterwards Bland suggested the pair compile a full-blown biography of Cixi along the same lines. Backhouse happily agreed and suggested including among other materials



THE "HOLY MOTHER," HER MAJESTY TZU HSI.
(FROM A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN 1903.)

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I

THE PARENTAGE AND YOUTH OF YEHONALA

THE family of Yehonala, one of the oldest of the Manchu clans, traces its descent in direct line to Prince Yangkunu, whose daughter married (in 1588) Nurhachu, the real founder of Manchu rule in China and the first direct ancestor of the Ta Ching Emperors. Yangkunu was killed at Mukden in 1583, in one of his raids upon the territories which still owed allegiance to the degenerate Chinese sovereign Wan Li. His clan lived and flourished in that region, near the Korean border, which is dominated by the Long White Mountain, the true cradle of the Manchu stock. He and his people seem to have acquired the arts of war, and much lust of conquest, by constantly harassing the rich lands on their ever-shifting borders, those rich lands which to-day seem to be about to pass under the yoke of new invaders. Yangkunu's daughter assumed the title of Empress by right of her husband's conquests, and her son it was who eventually wrested the whole of Manchuria from the Ming Dynasty and reigned under the name of Tien-Ts'ung.

Into this clan, in November 1835, was born Yehonala, whose life was destined to influence countless millions of human beings, Yehonala, who was to be thrice Regent of China and its

autocratic ruler for over half a century. Her father, whose name was Hui Cheng, held hereditary rank as Captain in one of the Eight Banner Corps. Considering the advantages of his birth, he was generally accounted unsuccessful by his contemporaries; at the time of his death he had held no higher post than that of an Intendant of Circuit, or Taotai. Holding this rank in the province of Anhui, he died when his daughter was but three years of age. His widow and family were well cared for by a kinsman named Muyanga, father of her who subsequently became Empress Consort of Hsien-Feng and Co-Regent with Yehonala. From him the children received every advantage of education.

Many unfounded and ridiculous stories have been circulated in recent years attributing to the Empress Dowager humble, and sometimes disgraceful, antecedents. Many of these are nothing more than the fruit of Yellow Journalism, seeking sensational material of the kind which appeals to the iconoclastic instincts of its readers. Others, however, undoubtedly owe their origin to the envy, hatred and malice of Palace intrigues, to the initiative of the Iron-capped Princes and other high officials of the elder branch of the Imperial family, many of whom were addicted to besmirching the family and character of Tzū Hsi in order to inflict "loss of face" on the Yehonala clan. In this way, and because mud thrown from above usually sticks, their malicious stories were freely circulated, and often believed, in Peking and in the South: witness the writings of K'ang Yu-wei and his contemporaries.¹

To cite an instance. One of these mythical stories used to be told, with every appearance of good faith, by Prince Tun, the fifth son of the Emperor Tao-Kuang. This Prince cherished a grudge against Tzū Hsi because of his disappointed ambitions: adopted himself out of the direct line of succession, he had nevertheless hoped, in 1875, that his son would have been chosen Emperor.

1. As an example of unbalanced vituperation, uttered in good faith and with the best intentions, *vide The Chinese Crisis from Within* by "Wen Ching," republished from the *Singapore Free Press* in 1901 (Grant Richards).

The story, as he used to tell it, was that when the Empress's mother had been left a widow with a large family (including the future ruler of China) they lived in the most abject poverty at the prefectural city of Ningkuo, where her husband had held office and died. Having no funds to pay for her return to Peking, she would have been reduced to beggary had it not been that, by a lucky accident, a sum of money intended for another traveller was delivered on board of her boat at a city on the way, and that the traveller, on learning of the mistake and being moved to pity at the sight of the family's destitution, insisted on her keeping the money. Twenty-five years later, when Tzŭ Hsi had become the all-powerful Regent, this official appeared for audience at Peking, when, remembering the benefits received at his hands, the Empress raised him from his knees and expressed her gratitude for his kindness. The story is prettier than many which emanate from the same source, and original, too, in the idea of a Manchu official dying at his provincial post in abject poverty, but unfortunately for the truth of the narrative, it has been established beyond shadow of doubt that neither the wife nor the family of Tzŭ Hsi's father were with him at the time of his death. They had gone on ahead to Peking, in anticipation of his early return thither to take up a new appointment in the White Banner Corps.

Before proceeding further, it may be well to refer briefly to the Yehonala clan and its position in relation to the elder branch of the Imperial family, a question of no small importance, past and future, in its effect on the history of modern China. Jealousy and friction there have always been between the Imperial house and this powerful patrician clan, since the first Yehonala became *de facto* ruler of the Empire after the collapse of the Tsai Yüan conspiracy, but their relations became more markedly strained after the *coup d'état* in 1898, and although the wholesome fear of the Empress Dowager's "divine wrath" prevented any definite cleavage, the possibilities of trouble were ever latent in the Forbidden City. Recent events at Peking, and especially the dismissal of the Chihli Viceroy, Tuan Fang, for alleged irreverence at the funeral

ceremonies of the late Empress Dowager, have emphasised the divisions in the Manchu camp and the dangers that beset its Government, now bereft of the strong hand of Tzū Hsi. It is difficult for foreigners to form any clear idea of the actual conditions of life and of party divisions in the Palace, confused as they are by intricate questions of genealogy, of inter-marriage and adoptions by relatives, of ancient clan feuds. It should, however, be explained that the Imperial Clansmen (known in their own tongue as Aisin Gioros) divided into the Yellow and Red Girdles, are the descendants respectively of Nurhachu himself and of that ruler's ancestors, by virtue of which ancestry they consider themselves (and the Chinese would recognise the claim) to be the *sang pur* and highest nobility of the Manchu Dynasty. The Yehonala clan, although in no sense of Royal blood (as marriages between the sovereign and female members of a family do not entitle that family to claim more than noble rank) owes its great power not only to its numbers, but to the fact that it has given three Empresses Dowager to the Empire; but, above all, to the great prestige and personal popularity of Tzū Hsi. If recent events are to be interpreted in the light of history, and of her significant death-bed mandate, the present leaders of the Yehonala clan are determined that the present Empress Dowager, the widow of Kuang-Hsü, shall follow in the footsteps of her august aunt, and control the business of the State, at least during the Regency. And, thanks to Tzū Hsi's far-seeing statecraft, the young Emperor is a grandson of Jung Lu, and may be expected therefore to reverence the policy handed down by the Old Buddha.

One long-standing cause of suspicion and dissension between the parties in the Palace arises from the fear of the elder descendants of Tao-Kuang (of whom Prince P'u Lun and Prince Kung are the chief representatives) that the present boy-Emperor, or his father, the Regent, will hereafter elevate the founder of his branch, the first Prince Ch'un, to the posthumous rank of Emperor, a species of canonisation which Europeans might consider unimportant, but which, in the eyes of the Chinese, would



THE REGENT, PRINCE CH'UN, WITH HIS TWO SONS, THE PRESENT EMPEROR (STANDING) AND PRINCE P'U CHIEH.

constitute a sort of posthumous usurpation on the part of the junior branch of the Imperial clan, since the first Prince Ch'un would thus be placed on a footing of equality with Nurhachu, the founder of the Dynasty, and would practically become the founder of a new line. The first Prince Ch'un had himself foreseen the possibility of such an occurrence, and had realised that it could not fail to lead to serious trouble, for which reason, as will be seen hereafter, he had taken precautions to prevent it. It has not escaped the attention of those whose business it is to watch the straws that float down the stream of high Chinese policy that, since the accession of the present child-Emperor to the Throne, the ancestral sacrifices made at the mausoleum of the first Prince Ch'un have been greatly elaborated in pomp and circumstance, while in official documents his name has been given "double elevation," that is to say, in the eyes of the *literati* he is made to rank on the same level as a reigning Emperor. It is commonly believed by those Chinese who are in a position to speak with authority on the subject, that when the Emperor attains his majority, he will be led to confer further posthumous honours upon his grandfather, including that of "triple elevation," which would place him on a footing of equality with a deceased Emperor, and entitle him to worship at a special shrine in the Temple of the Ancestors of the Dynasty. From a Chinese constitutional point of view, the consequences of such a step would be extremely serious and difficult of adjustment.

The Old Buddha was a strong partisan, and during her lifetime her immediate kinsmen were practically above the law, basking in the sunshine of her protection or making hay thereby, so that there was always a strong undercurrent of friction between them and the Yellow and Red Girdles, friction of which echoes frequently reached the tea-houses and market places of the capital. Tzŭ Hsi delighted to snub the Aisin Gioros; in one Decree she forbade them to reside in the business quarter of the city, on the ground that she had heard it said that some of them were making money by disreputable trades. She was by no means beloved of

the Iron-capped princes and other noble descendants of Nurhachu, who, while they feared her, never ceased to complain that she curtailed their time-honoured privileges.

An interesting example of her masterful methods of dealing with these hereditary aristocrats occurred when one of the Imperial Dukes ventured to build himself a pretentious house in the immediate vicinity of the Imperial City, and overlooking a considerable portion of the palace enclosure. No sooner was the building completed than the Old Buddha confiscated it, reprimanding the owner for his lack of decorum in daring to overlook the Palace grounds, and forthwith she bestowed it upon her younger brother, the Duke Chao.

Another example of her clannishness, and of the difficulties which it created for the local authorities, occurred upon the establishment of the new Police Board at Peking, three years after the return of the Court from exile in 1902. The Grand Councillor, Hsü Shih-ch'ang, a Chinese by birth, and a favourite of Her Majesty, was placed at the head of this new Board, but he soon realised that the lot of his policemen, when dealing with the members of the ruling clan, was by no means a happy one. Her Majesty's third brother, the Duke Kuei Hsiang, was a particularly hardened offender, absolutely declining to recognise police regulations of any kind, and inciting his retainers to "gain face" by driving on the wrong side of the road and by committing other breaches of the regulations. On one occasion a zealous policeman went so far as to arrest one of the Duke's servants. Hsü Shih-ch'ang, hearing of the occurrence, promptly ordered the man's release, but the Duke, grievously insulted, insisted upon an abject apology from the head of the Board in person. Thrice did the unfortunate Hsü call at the Duke's palace without gaining admission, and it was only after he had performed a kowtow before the Duke in the open courtyard outside the palace that his apology was accepted. An idea of the importance of this incident in the eyes of the Pekinese, and of the power of the clansmen, may be inferred from the fact that Hsü subsequently

became Viceroy of the Manchurian provinces, later President of the Ministry of Posts and Communications, and in August, 1910, was elevated to the Grand Council. On this occasion, however, the Old Buddha, learning of the incident, "excused" Hsü from further attendance at the Grand Council, and shortly afterwards he was transferred to Mukden.

Yehonala's mother, the lady Nihulu, survived her husband for many years, residing in his house in "Pewter Lane" (Hsi-la-hu-t'ung), quite close to the Legation quarter. When her daughter became Empress Mother, she received the rank of Imperial Duchess. She appears to have been a lady of great ability and good sense, distinguished even amongst the members of a clan always noted for the intelligence of its women kind. After living to a ripe old age, she was buried beside her husband in the family graveyard which lies without the city to the west, in the vicinity of the Europeans' race-course, where her daughter's filial piety was displayed by the erection of an honorific arch and the customary marble tablets. When, in January 1902, the Empress Dowager returned from exile by railway from Cheng-ting fu, she gained great kudos from the orthodox by declining to enter the capital by the Hankow railway line, because that line ran close to her parents' graves, and it would have been a serious breach of respect to their memory to pass the spot without reverently alighting to make obeisance. She therefore changed her route, entering Peking from the south, to the great admiration of all her people.

Of Yehonala's childhood there is little to record except that among her youthful playmates was a kinsman, Jung Lu, who in after years was to play so prominent a part in many a crisis of her career. By common report she had been betrothed to him from birth. This report is not verifiable, but there is no doubt that the great influence which Jung Lu exercised over her, far greater than that of any of her family or highest officials, was founded in their early youth. K'ang Yu-wei and other Chinese officials opposed to the Manchu rule have not hesitated to assert that he