The Empress Dowager’s Role in the Reforms of 1898

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Abstract

The Empress Dowager Cixi has been chastised in the historical record—she is accused of being an evil and ruthless leader. Some recent historical research, however, has challenged this representation. One blemish remaining on the Empress’ record is her role in ending the Hundred Days Reform of 1898 and ordering the executions of six men involved. By specifically re-examining the events and important players in the Hundred Days Reform, especially Kang Youwei, the Empress Dowager Cixi is once again redeemed.

Introduction

Crushed by consecutive wars with outside powers and riddled with internal strife, China found itself in a rather dismal and declining state during the nineteenth century. The first and second Opium Wars forced China’s borders open to the influence of the West. Living conditions were going from bad to worse. These hardships triggered both the Taiping and Nien rebellions, which were peasant-led resistance movements that ultimately failed. Due to these conditions, China had begun to attempt slight reforms under the Self-Strengthening Movement. These reform measures included military reform as well as sending select students abroad to learn about foreign

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440 Chien Po-Tsan, Shao Hsun-Cheng, and Hu Hua, Concise History of China (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1964), 96-104.
institutions and practices. The Sino-Japanese War, however, was something very different – it was the final straw. Not only did this defeat shock the Chinese people, but it also proved the ineffectiveness of previous reforms. Losing to Western powers and submitting to humiliating treaties was bad enough, but Japan was seen as particularly inferior. This loss, therefore, was especially embarrassing and severely damaged the pride of the Chinese people. Although this was a disaster, it seemed that out of this calamity China had finally found an impetus to enact true, sweeping reforms.

The spring and summer months of 1898 are known as the Hundred Days Reform. During this time, the Emperor, taking the advice and guidance of reform-minded individuals, issued edict after edict, although this push for change ultimately failed. Many historians have studied these events in an attempt to understand what went wrong: why did China fail to modernize? Some blame the conservatives in government, including the Empress Dowager, and others blame the aggressive speed of the reforms. In just over a century since this event, the arguments made have been re-evaluated, revised, and even rejected. Even the most well-intentioned works, however, still represent the Empress Dowager Cixi in an extremely negative light. Regardless of whoever else is held responsible, she seems constantly to be a magnet for criticism—a focal point for condemnation. It is as though she alone must carry the burden of destroying China’s chance of modernization in 1898 and, thus, preventing the nation from reaching its potential. Yet, a closer look at the Hundred Days Reform, and the different historical debates surrounding it, creates a new picture. It becomes clear that the alleged hero of reform, Kang Youwei, was actually acting with ulterior motives. It was only these selfish goals that placed Kang in line with the Emperor and in opposition with the Dowager. The Empress Dowager, on the other hand, responded to Kang’s

questionable aspirations and corresponding actions in the only way appropriate for someone in her position.

**The Hundred Days Reform – A Brief Background**

Despite the failure of the Hundred Days Reform, it is seen as an important moment in Chinese history. It was the first real step toward modernization and the West. Although the reforms were never put into full effect, the mere act of issuing reforms has earned the Hundred Days a prominent place in Chinese memory. The classic narrative to explain why these reforms failed is that the Empress Dowager Cixi came out of retirement at the Summer Palace and stole back power from the reform-minded Emperor. Due to her alleged conservative tendencies, the Empress violently and vengefully crushed reform once she had usurped power. It is true that Empress Cixi had been residing at the Summer Palace during the Hundred Days and that her nephew, the Emperor, had at least nominal control. It is also true that once the Dowager returned to the Forbidden City, the Hundred Days Reform ended and many edicts were rescinded, therefore preventing certain reformers from accomplishing their goals. Leaders of reform, furthermore, were sentenced to death without trial— a fact that has led many historians to view the Empress as a merciless villain and reform leaders as martyrs. These details, as well as the hyperbolic writings of the reform leader Kang Youwei while in exile, have led many historians to represent the Hundred Days Reform in a black and white, good versus evil, paradigm, which ultimately is too simplistic and misleading.

**Defending the Empress Dowager**

Traditional historical opinions of the Empress have been colored by vicious

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444 Roger R. Thompson, review of *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* by Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, *The China Quarterly*, No. 176 (Dec., 2003): 1112-1114.

rumors. Some of these rumors made Cixi out to be a murderer and others were even more debased—taking on sexual undertones. Kang Youwei “even implied that Li Lien-ying, who attended on her, was not a eunuch.” One writer, Sir Edmund Backhouse, falsified a diary and claimed Cixiauthored it. This diary makes her seem threatening and combative, and it was subsequently quoted as fact. The Empress’ role in the Boxer Rebellion (which occurred after the Hundred Days Reform) has led historians to present the Empress as extremely xenophobic as well. Her level of participation and knowledge of the rebellion, however, has been questioned. It seems that the Empress actually tried to stop the Boxers once she truly understood the situation; she issued various edicts but unfortunately had little success.

Some historians have looked beyond the Empress’ political actions in order to present her in a more flattering light. These revised accounts highlight admirable qualities of her personality. By turning to sources such as Mrs. Conger and Princess Der Ling, historians have succeeded in proving that the Empress was not simply a heartless villain. Mrs. Conger, the American wife of a missionary in China, stated in a letter that when she was given an audience with the Empress, the Empress “was bright and happy and her face flowed with good will. There was no trace of cruelty to be seen.” Although the Empress could have been putting on a kind face for her guest, Princess Der Ling spent two years with the Dowager. Der Ling wrote a book recounting her experiences in the Imperial Court and, although she

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447 Grant Hayter-Menzies, *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 163.
448 Chan, “Reformer as Conspirator,” 40.
identified herself as a foreigner, she thought of the Empress as a mother. She admits that the Empress had her moments of anger, but maintains that this anger was always justified. Der Ling even expresses a desire to return to the Imperial City.\textsuperscript{453} Other historians have drawn attention to the Empress’s love of calligraphy, but this especially is not a convincing reason to change the common perceptions of the Empress.\textsuperscript{454} Cixi could certainly love calligraphy and even be kind to her allies, while still thwarting all progress in China by ruling with an iron fist.

A true defense of the Empress must encompass her political actions. In her new book, \textit{The Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China}, Jung Chang examines previously untapped resources including diaries, letters, and eyewitness accounts pertaining to the Empress Dowager Cixi in order to construct a new image of the Empress as a political figure. Her book encompasses Cixi’s entire political career—thoroughly modifying the historical record.\textsuperscript{455} Even Jung Chang, however, cannot deny that when she resumed power, the Empress ordered the execution of six reform leaders without proper trials – Chang even asserts that two of these men were innocent victims.\textsuperscript{456} By re-examining the motivations of the Empress and the figure of Kang Youwei, it becomes apparent that the Empress acted in the best way possible, not only for her own preservation but also for the preservation of her country.

\textbf{The Empress as a Reform Minded Leader}

Cixi is often presented as a conservative blockade, but she was not as clung to the past as these accounts suggest. The Dowager was intensely interested in new technology, especially Western technology. She established China’s first telegraph –

\textsuperscript{453} Princess Der Ling, \textit{Two Years in the Forbidden City} (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1911).

\textsuperscript{454} Yuhang and Zurndorfer, “Rethinking Empress Dowarger Cixi through Production of Art.”

\textsuperscript{455} Chang, \textit{The Empress Dowager Cixi}.

\textsuperscript{456} Ibid., loc 4371.
an essential improvement to communication technology.\textsuperscript{457} She also desired to travel by train even though her ministers were apprehensive.\textsuperscript{458} Cixi managed to build China’s first railroad despite opposition from conservatives in court.\textsuperscript{459} Furthermore, she was interested in photography. In Der Ling’s accounts, the Empress gets her picture taken over and over again and even insists on going into the dark room.\textsuperscript{460} As far as reform, as early as 1860 Cixi was already open to the idea.\textsuperscript{461} She encouraged educational reform in such subjects as math and astronomy.\textsuperscript{462} In order to facilitate a more Western education, she encouraged Chinese students to be sent abroad.\textsuperscript{463} Many of these early reforms were a part of the Self-Strengthening Movement. Her major ally in this reform was Li Hongzhang (also referred to as Earl Li), an official in the Imperial Court. Indeed, “The earl had by now emerged as the foremost moderniser of the country…. With [his] assistance, Cixi steadily, yet radically, pushed the empire toward modernity.”\textsuperscript{464} It is also important to note that one of the reforms Li championed was the removal, or at least revision, of the “hollow and ornamental” eight-legged essay.\textsuperscript{465} During the Hundred Days Reform, Kang Youwei would advocate again for this particular reform. Already it seems that Cixi’s motive for executing reform leaders could not have been the actual reforms they proposed.

It is clear that the Empress was actually a supporter of reform, and the Dowager was similarly favorable to the Hundred Days Reform. The Empress Dowager Cixi was in retirement before the Hundred Days. During this time,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{457} Ibid., loc 2297.
\item \textsuperscript{459} Chang, \textit{The Empress Dowager Cixi}, loc 2371.
\item \textsuperscript{460} Ling, \textit{Two Years in the Forbidden City}.
\item \textsuperscript{462} Meribeth E. Cameron, \textit{The Reform Movement in China 1898-1912} (New York: Octagon Books, 1963).
\item \textsuperscript{463} Chang, \textit{The Empress Dowager Cixi}, loc 2283.
\item \textsuperscript{464} Ibid., loc 2209.
\item \textsuperscript{465} Grasso, Corrin, and Kort, \textit{Modernization and Revolution in China}, 52.
\end{itemize}
“Emperor Guangxu did nothing to follow up Cixi’s reforms, and let them lapse.”

Chung goes even further by arguing, “if Cixi had been in charge, she would never have allowed Japan to become superior in military hardware.” In fact, after the embarrassing loss in the Sino-Japanese War, “with the survival of his dynasty at stake, Emperor Guangxu turned to Cixi.” The reforms of 1898 were not passed despite her disapproval: the situation was quite the opposite. Well before Chang’s new book, historians consistently asserted that Cixi at least passively approved of the Hundred Days, asserting that, “The Dowager did not oppose reform at the outset. In fact, without her consent, the reform edicts could not have been issued.” Furthermore, “there is no lack of evidence that she was not only well aware of most of what Guangxu was doing that spring and summer of 1898 but was supportive of reform.” Chang, however, goes further: she suggests the Dowager’s role was even larger than these historical narratives claim. She states that “altogether they spent more than two thirds of their time together” in order to prove that the Hundred Days Reform was—from the beginning—a collaborative effort between the Empress and her nephew.

**The Anti-Dowager Plot: Controversy Resolved**

Regardless of the Empress’s initial role in the reforms, in September 1898 the Dowager’s return to power signaled the end of the Hundred Days. She did not just relinquish her support of the movement, however, but executed the leaders of reform as a demonstration of this disapproval. What had changed? Although the reforms were made quickly, they were not excessively radical. Upon her return to the throne, the Empress claimed the reforms were breaking tradition in order to

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466 Chang, *The Empress Dowager Cixi*, loc 2870.
467 Ibid., loc 3361.
468 Ibid., loc 4001.
470 Hayter-Menzies, *Imperial Masquerade*, 70.
471 Chang, *The Empress Dowager Cixi*, loc 4014, 4036.
justify their reversal, but a closer study of the Empress’ actions while in power prove that she had no qualms about breaking tradition when it suited her own needs. Her appointment of the Emperor Guangxu, for example, went against traditional succession practices in China, but it helped her keep her own power and was thus acceptable.\textsuperscript{474} The accounts of Princess Der Ling, furthermore, exhibit moments when, in the presence of foreigners, the Empress broke traditional rules of the Imperial Court. For example, she allowed people to sit in her presence. This breach of tradition made the court ladies feel uncomfortable, but the Empress believed it would leave a better impression on her foreign guests.\textsuperscript{475} Additionally, the Princess’ accounts reveal that the Dowager used tradition as a convenient excuse. When the Empress was asked to sit for a portrait, she was hesitant because she did not know what a portrait was and what sitting for one would entail. She lied to the foreigners and told them that according to tradition she would have to ask her ministers for approval. This lie suited the Empress well because she could take time to think about the matter and then if she wanted to refuse she could do so without insult. This motivation she explicitly expressed to Der Ling.\textsuperscript{476} If the reforms were not that radical, and the Dowager presumably only used tradition as an excuse, then the most probable reason for the Empress’ actions in September of 1898 is the reformers’ plot against her. Many different people participated in the Hundred Days Reform, but only a select few – Kang Youwei and his friends – knew about this plot.

The Anti-Dowager Plot has attracted ample historical research. If this is the reason the Empress Dowager Cixi returned to power, it would explain why she was so unkind in her punishments and so determined to catch Kang, who escaped before the Empress could make him pay. There are several different versions of the plot, some say that the Empress would be murdered while others assert that she would only be imprisoned and stripped of her power. Luke Kwong, in his book, \textit{A Mosaic of

\vspace{1cm}\textsuperscript{474} Cameron, \textit{The Reform Movement in China}, 31.\textsuperscript{475} Ling, \textit{Two Years in the Forbidden City}, 234. \textsuperscript{476} Ibid., 214-215, 234, 201.
*Hundred Days Reform*, is skeptical of the plot entirely and points to some discrepancies. His strongest evidence is based on the timeline of events. The Dowager, he insists, arrived too early in the Forbidden City and therefore, “[the Dowager’s] decision to resume tutelage was not prompted by any knowledge of a plot.”\(^{477}\) Even this minority dissenter, however, admits that some kind of plot was definitely discussed, even if it was not yet ready to be executed.\(^{478}\) Kwong argues, “Whether T’an and Yuan actually talked about a forceful takeover of the Summer Palace remains a moot point.”\(^{479}\) T’an Sitong was a friend of Kang Youwei and involved in the plot. T’an is the one who revealed the plan to General Yuan Skikai—an ambitious military man who strategically befriended Kang’s people. Ultimately, Yuan sided with the Empress by warning her of the plot.

Historian Young-Tsu Wong responds to Kwong’s various arguments, including this particular argument about the Anti-Dowager Plot. He states, “We cannot consider the plot a ‘moot point,’ since Liang confirmed the plot in a secret correspondence to Kang...Liang’s secret letter has since unequivocally confirmed the plot.”\(^{480}\) (Liang Qichao was Kang’s student and right hand man during the Hundred Days.) Wong also revises the timeline of events to disprove Kwong’s statements. Wong’s work, similar to Chang’s book, looks at letters that reveal exactly when the Dowager learned of the plot against her. Kwong claims that “it is difficult to explain why, on learning of the conspiracy from Yuan, Jung-lu did not hasten to inform [the Dowager] of it.”\(^{481}\) Jung-lu was in charge of the military and was Cixi’s very powerful ally. Wong maintains that there is a letter in the Palace archives that “incidentally substantiates the possibility that Yuan disclosed the plots on September 19\(^{th}\). It can also explain why the Dowager rushed back to the

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\(^{478}\) Kwong, *A Mosaic of the Hundred Days*, 213-221.

\(^{479}\) Ibid., 217.

\(^{480}\) Wong, “Revisionism Reconsidered,” 536.

\(^{481}\) Kwong, *A Mosaic of Reform*, 217.
Forbidden City on the evening of the same day.” Wong’s evidence proves that the Empress learned of the plot earlier than Kwong believes, therefore solving the issue of her return.

It is clear that the plot did in fact exist, although the nature of the plot may be exaggerated in some accounts. Although Chang argues the plotters intended to murder the Empress, it seems more likely that the immediate plan was to kill only Cixi’s ally Jung-lu. Jung-lu was powerful because of his control of the army, but once this obstacle was gone the plotters could then imprison the Empress at the Summer Palace. In a discussion with Princess Der Ling, the Empress discusses the plot and maintains that it was only to imprison her – not to murder her. Chang claims that Cixi herself covered up the plot because she did not want the Emperor’s involvement to be revealed. The Empress does not suggest to Der Ling that the Emperor was involved, which is consistent with Chang’s argument. There is no reason, however, for Cixi to acknowledge the existence of the plot to Der Ling but disguise the murderous nature of it – if anything it would have strengthened her justification for executing the plotters and continuing to hunt down Kang. Regardless of whether or not Kang intended to have the Empress murdered right away, she clearly would have been vulnerable to eventual assassination if Kang had triumphed. This plot, therefore, threatened not just the Dowager’s power, but also her well-being. The only way for the Empress to guarantee her safety was to once again take the reigns of power.

The Empress and The Emperor - Contrasting Imperial Personalities

The Emperor and the Empress are often presented in opposition during the Hundred Days; the Emperor is presented as favorable to reform but constantly

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482 Wong, “Revisionism Reconsidered,” 537.
483 Chang, *The Empress Dowager Cixi*, loc 4219.
484 Ling, *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, 369-370.
overpowered by his ruthless and backwards aunt, the Empress.\textsuperscript{486} It appears that this could not be true since Cixi worked with the Emperor to enact reforms. There was, however, a major difference between these two leaders. The Empress Dowager Cixi was not just powerful but had remained powerful for decades. Her years of experience with court politics taught her how to deal with the rivalries she encountered. In order to gain power at all, the Empress had to outmaneuver her enemy, Sushun. Before she was Empress, this prominent member of the Imperial Court was “the only man on the Board who had had some idea of Cixi’s intelligence, and he had wanted her killed.”\textsuperscript{487} Although this plan never went into action, Sushun did have Cixi’s young son and only male heir to the throne taken from her—a cruel measure to take against a new mother.\textsuperscript{488} Sushun hoped, in light of the Emperor’s ill health, to become regent in charge of the nation until Cixi’s son was old enough to rule. This would have weakened Cixi greatly, exposing her to further attack. The Empress, however, had already made valuable allies. Her supporters helped Cixi after the Emperor’s death and Sushun’s efforts were thwarted. Instead of a board of regents headed by Sushun, Cixi gained power as the Dowager.\textsuperscript{489} This episode was only the beginning of a long political career.

The Emperor, in terms of experience and influence, was nothing like his aunt. In 1898, the Emperor ruled in name only. He was a weak and inefficient ruler.\textsuperscript{490} He attempted to take control of government at the young age of twenty-six with little experience and inadequate training. Thus, “No part of his education would equip him to handle the modern world.”\textsuperscript{491} Some of his failures as a leader, such as not following through on Cixi’s earlier reform policies, have already been mentioned. Beyond his own inefficiencies, the emperor had to deal with the

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\textsuperscript{486} Wong, “Revisionism Reconsidered,” 531, 533.  \\
\textsuperscript{487} Chang, The Empress Dowager Cixi, loc 990.  \\
\textsuperscript{488} Keither Laidler, The Last Empress: The She-Dragon of China (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2003), 100.  \\
\textsuperscript{489} Woo, “Empress Dowager Cixi,” 58.  \\
\textsuperscript{490} Cameron, Reform Movement in China, 49.  \\
\textsuperscript{491} Chang, The Empress Dowager Cixi, loc 2693.
\end{flushright}
Imperial Court; he was intelligent and had ambition but simply was not clever enough to manipulate court politics in his favor.\textsuperscript{492} It is true that the court was riddled with factions, and even the Empress was not as powerful as previous scholarship maintains. Cixi was forced to get information indirectly through various sources, and many of her actions were subject to this possibly inaccurate and even biased information.\textsuperscript{493} Furthermore, Princess Der Ling, whose stay at the Forbidden City was after the Empress’ return to power, noted that, “Her Majesty was not able to introduce reforms entirely alone, even though she might desire to do so, but had to consult with ministers.”\textsuperscript{494} Conger similarly asks, “how can this great Empire grow in strength and glory when her rulers are in such bondage?”\textsuperscript{495} It is clear that “to a great degree, both Cixi and her nephew, by virtue of their imperial rank, were always prisoners of their own court.”\textsuperscript{496}

The Empress, unlike her nephew, however, had the ability to maintain and exert power. For her, losing power was unacceptable.\textsuperscript{497} Her uncanny ability to exercise power despite these restrictions is perhaps why she was seen as a force constantly preventing the Emperor from exerting power. It seems that the truth of situation was that the Emperor was just significantly less adept at handling court politics in comparison with his aunt. Neither one was free from constraint, but the Empress had the experience and political savvy to still get what she wanted.\textsuperscript{498} The Empress’ power and support were, therefore, invaluable to the Hundred Days Reform. Kang Youwei and his friends, however, became inexplicably aligned with the emperor instead.

\textbf{Kang Youwei – A Hero Debunked}

\textsuperscript{492} Woo, \textit{Empress Dowager Cixi}, 205.  
\textsuperscript{493} Kwong, \textit{Mosaic of Reform}, 34-40.  
\textsuperscript{494} Ling, \textit{Two Years in the Forbidden City}, 236.  
\textsuperscript{495} Conger, \textit{Letters from China}, 43.  
\textsuperscript{496} Hayter-Menzies, \textit{Imperial Masquerade}, 73.  
\textsuperscript{497} Laidler, \textit{The Last Empress}, 137.  
\textsuperscript{498} Hayter-Menzies, \textit{Imperial Masquerade}, 70.
Through the Anti-Dowager Plot, the Kang Youwei and his friends made an enemy out of a potentially important ally. Cixi’s immense influence in the Imperial Court was unmatched by anyone else, mostly notably her nephew. During the Self-Strengthening Movement, Li Hongzhang found himself in trouble but he had aligned himself with the Empress. Indeed, “It was said that only the personal intervention of the most powerful person in Beijing, the Empress Dowager Cixi, saved Li from losing his head.”\(^{499}\) Not all of the reformers of the Hundred Days plotted against Cixi and those that did not were treated similarly to Li: their lives were spared, as were their reforms.\(^{500}\) For instance, Zhang Zhidong was a moderate reformer who proposed industrial and educational revamping in China. Zhang was not involved in the plot and actually appealed to the Dowager. In fact, “Despite the Empress Dowager Cixi’s suppression of the reforms, many of Zhang’s proposed social and educational changes were eventually implemented. Some of them even outlasted the Qing.”\(^{501}\) Women’s education was another area of reform spared by the Empress. As an educated woman, this group of reformers used the Empress Dowager Cixi as a role model, which certainly (and intentionally) flattered her. These reforms were also allowed to continue, although they did not flourish.\(^{502}\)

Why did Kang Youwei and his friends choose to align themselves with someone as weak as the Emperor as opposed to the formidable Empress? In light of the fact that the Empress and Emperor initially worked together, why did Kang Youwei and his allies work against her at all? Did these leaders simply forget that “the events of 1898 were as much about power as they were about ideas?”\(^{503}\) Did they simply not realize that in the world of imperial politics, a world of “ever-

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\(^{500}\) Cameron, *Reform Movement in China*, 39.

\(^{501}\) Tze-Ki Hon, “Zhang Zhidong’s Proposal for Reform: A New Reading of the Quanxue Pian” in Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow’s *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period Political and Cultural Change in the Late Qing China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 77-98, 79.


\(^{503}\) Thompson, review of *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China*, 1113.
shifting allegiances and power struggles, [Empress Dowager Cixi’s] support was invaluable.”

The reformers were not that foolish. In reality, Kang Youwei saw in the Emperor’s weakness something exploitable. Kang was a revolutionary-minded individual, but he desired revolution not to strengthen China, but to strengthen himself.

Although the reforms themselves were rather moderate, as stated earlier, they were made in very rapid succession. Some historians point to this rushed approach to reform as the cause of its failure. Unlike the Self-Strengthening reformers, these leaders did not allow China to slowly transform, but attempted to force reform upon the unprepared nation. The problem, however, was more than just the speed of reform – it was the reformers themselves. Kang Youwei was very radical. Although the actual reforms were moderate, “one may argue that the Hundred Days Reform programs seem too modest to match Kang’s political thought.” In fact, it has been argued that Kang played only a minor role in the Hundred Days Reform. Kwong maintains that Kang actually did not have “a very impressive record—at any rate, not one that sustains the conventional image of K’ang as the mastermind of the 1898 reforms.” Kang’s reputation as a champion reformer is a myth constructed by his students. Indeed, “K’ang’s former pupil who prefaced the collection, compared K’ang to the famous Wang An-shih who assisted the Emperor Shen-tsung of Northern Sung in implementing institutional changes...the analogy is nonetheless false.” Kang was not successful in his reform agenda, but what is more shocking is the reality of what his reform agenda entailed.

By the Hundred Days Reform, Kang and his allied reformers no longer

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504 Hayter-Menzies, Imperial Masquerade, 39.
505 Cameron, Reform Movement in China, 41-42.
507 Wong, “Revisionism Reconsidered,” 527.
508 Kwong, A Mosaic of the Hundred Days, 196.
509 Ibid., 197.
respected the authority of the monarchy. Some historians even assert that Kang was trying to destroy the monarchy completely, stating, “By following such overall reformation the Qing monarch would exist in name only.” These arguments contend that Kang had intentions of using imperial power in order to destroy imperial power. By taking a closer look at the language Kang used in his memorials to the throne, revolutionary undertones become apparent. Jianhua Chen deciphers the language for his English speaking audience in his article, “World Revolution Knocking at the Heavenly Gate.” He asserts that although Kang avoided using the term *geming*, which means revolution, he did so only to make his changes seem less radical. Regardless, “The Hundred Day Reform was haunted by the specter of revolution ... Kang Youwei tried to avoid using *geming*, though his radical reform project was no less than a revolution.” Instead, Kang used the term *bianfa* and *weixin*. Chen explains that, “the term *weixin* was inscribed with a radical tendency.” Other historians have argued that the reformers were even willing to take up arms in order to bring down the monarchy.

There is a common error in the generalization that late Ch’ing reformers were wedded to peaceful change. A closer examination of the reformers’ activities from 1898 to 1911 reveals that they were ready to take up arms against the Ch’ing government at critical moments, as testified by the aborted coup of 1898...

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511 Peter Zarrow, “The Reform Movement, The Monarchy, and Political Modernity,” in Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow’s *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period Political and Cultural Change in the Late Qing China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 17-47.
512 Chen, “World Revolution Knocking at the Heavenly Gate,” 100.
513 Ibid., 101.
514 Chang, “Reformer as Conspirator.”
Not only does the statement above confirm the Anti-Dowager Plot, but it also alludes to the potentially aggressive and revolutionary nature of the reformers.

Although Kang attempted to hide his revolutionary inclinations through Confucian teachings, it seems this was not only ineffective but actually backfired.\textsuperscript{515} It was not Confucian ideals but the model of Western Revolutions, including the French and American Revolutions that inspired Kang Youwei. He wanted to start by reducing the power of the throne, although the ultimate goal would be to eliminate it completely.

According to Kang’s reform schedule, the ideal of French or American democracy was too distant for China to achieve in one jump, and a more practical route was to move her from the Age of Disorder to the Age of Approaching Peace, namely transferring her authoritarian monarchy into a constitutional monarchy.\textsuperscript{516}

Chang maintains that Kang did not want to abolish the monarchy at all, but actually wanted to become the Emperor. It may be that “Kang wanted to become Emperor and had been trying to create a mandate for himself.”\textsuperscript{517} Although it does seem that “Kang’s prime concern at this time was clearly his political interests,” these interests did not necessarily include becoming Emperor.\textsuperscript{518} It is true that the reforms Kang pushed for would not immediately destroy the monarchy, but they would immediately distribute power in the form of a constitutional monarchy with a parliament. Rather than attempting to become the monarch, it is more likely that Kang wished to position himself, as opposed to the Emperor, as the leader of these

\textsuperscript{515} Cameron, \textit{The Reform Movement in China}, 50.
\textsuperscript{516} Chen, “World Revolution Knocking at the Heavenly Gate,” 96.
\textsuperscript{517} Chang, \textit{The Empress Dowager Cixi}, loc 4198.
\textsuperscript{518} Wong, “Revisionism Reconsidered,” 518-519.
parliamentary men. To the dismay of the Dowager, Kang advised the Emperor to fire top officials and recommended his own friends for positions, including high-ranking positions as ministers. People loyal to Kang began to surround the Emperor. General Yuan noted this favoritism and it is what motivated him to befriend Kang’s people.\(^{519}\) In order to control and manipulate the Emperor, “Kang preached to the young Emperor with a menacing manner.”\(^{520}\) Kang stressed the urgency of reform while reminding the Emperor of the past injuries the Empress had inflicted, including a secret treaty with Russia that the Emperor was not consulted on, in order to create a rift between them. No longer would aunt and nephew work together.\(^{521}\) The reputation of Kang Youwei seems doubly false – he was not a successful reformer and his plans for reform were constructed mainly for his own benefit.

**The Empress Redeemed**

It was neither Cixi’s conservative policies nor the Emperor’s propensity for reform that caused the lines to be drawn in the way that they were: Cixi and reformers were not inherently at odds. At first, the Empress even saw promise in Kang Youwei. One of Kang’s innovative ideas was the creation of the Planning Board. This political body would bypass the current government structures to enact reform measures.\(^{522}\) Chang maintains that the Dowager actually liked Kang’s proposal, stating, “Evidently, Kang and Cixi were thinking very much alike.” \(^{523}\) The Empress only became suspicious of the reform leader when she became aware of his potential revolutionary nature.\(^{524}\) It became apparent that Kang was not reforming the government but setting up the government for his own benefit. It is clear that “Cixi had never stood in the way of Kang’s reformist policies – indeed she agreed with them. She had actually been the first to appreciate Kang’s talents and promote

\(^{519}\) Chang, *The Empress Dowager Cixi*, loc 4177.

\(^{520}\) Jianhua, “World Revolution Knocking at the Heavenly Gate,” 102.

\(^{521}\) Chang, *The Empress Dowager Cixi*, loc 4063-4198.

\(^{522}\) Wong, “Revisionism Reconsidered,” 518-520.

\(^{523}\) Chang, *The Empress Dowager Cixi*, loc 4072.

\(^{524}\) Bland and Blackhouse, *China Under the Empress Dowager*, 129.
him. But she refused to hand over power to him.” Kang was attempting to aggrandize his own power by manipulating the emperor, and even worse he was plotting against the Empress.

Kang Youwei and his allies, aware of the Dowager’s savvy—that she could not be tricked nor bullied like her nephew—resorted to plotting against her. When the Dowager returned to the throne, she wanted the reforms to continue but found this impossible. It has already been mentioned how select reforms were allowed to continue, and only “those decrees concerning Kang and his associates were cancelled.” Unfortunately, the Empress was preoccupied with punishing the plotters so the cascade of reform edicts stopped as well giving the impression that reform was crushed. The plot against her explains Cixi’s vengeance; she had to set an example, but people not directly involved in the plot were shown some measure of mercy—even those associated with Kang. The executions were not demonstrations against reform but demonstrations against manipulative, power-hungry individuals.

Chang claims the reason the Empress did not hold official trials was because she did not want the Emperor to be implicated in the plot. Cixi had reason to believe that the Emperor was involved in the plot but wanted to present a unified front to the public. Although it is hard to speculate on the Empress’ inner thoughts, there is evidence suggesting further circumstances that not only inclined her but actually forced her to make this decision. Bland, a notoriously anti-Dowager historian, points to two main motivations. He claims “the emperor lived to see the New Year and thereafter to regain his strength, a result due in some degree to the Empress Dowager’s genuine fear of foreign intervention, but chiefly to her recognition of the strength of public opinion.”

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525 Chang, The Empress Dowager Cixi, loc 4182.
526 Ibid., loc 4457.
527 Ibid., loc 4445.
528 Ibid., loc 4381.
529 Bland and Blackhouse, China Under the Empress Dowager, 150.
a rift between the Manchu and the Chinese. The Qing dynasty was a Manchu dynasty but all of the people executed were Chinese. Keeping positive relations between the Chinese people and the Manchu rulers was a constant worry throughout Qing era, and Cixi was no exception. Indeed, “It seemed clearly inadvisable to prolong the trial, especially as there was undoubtedly a risk of widening the breach between Manchus and Chinese by any delay.”

Foreign intervention, as Bland mentions, was also a concern. Even though the Empress avoided any delays through official trials, “Sir Yinhuan was taken off the original list for execution. The British and the Japanese lobbied on his behalf.” When it comes to the domestic concerns of a sovereign nation, foreign intervention is usually inappropriate and should be minimal. For Cixi, however, it was a very real and palpable issue.

It is certainly lamentable that two innocent men may have been killed because they were not given a proper trial, but proper trials were not feasible; Cixi’s hands were tied. If the Dowager allowed time for foreign nations to impose their will upon her, she would either have to let the plotters go, which for reasons of her own security simply was not an option, or risk offending potential allies. Furthermore, implicating the Emperor in the plot and prolonged trials would have torn the country apart. The Empress would have wanted to be vindicated: she would have wanted to force her enemies to take responsibility for their actions by being convicted and disgraced. Kang Youwei was writing malicious lies about Cixi abroad and a trial would have revealed the truth. The Empress cared deeply about what foreigners thought of her, exemplified by her treatment of Mrs. Conger and her breach of court tradition in the presence of foreign guests. Every time the Empress had a guest she would question Princess Der Ling and anyone else present endlessly about what they thought of her.

As a leader, however, she had to put the needs of her country first. In September 1898, the Empress acted in the only

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530 Ibid., 154.
531 Chang, The Empress Dowager Cixi, loc 4417.
532 Ling, Two Years in the Forbidden City, 191.
way she could.

**Conclusion**

Defeated and on the run, the reformers who escaped spun hateful stories about the Dowager; representations of her in history are full of gross inaccuracies based on these lies. The Empress has unjustly carried the burden of destroying reform in China when in reality she encouraged it. When reform leaders threatened her, she did what any other powerful and gifted monarch would have done in the situation – she defended herself and ensured nothing of the sort would ever be attempted again. The plot against her was planned not because of her conservative tendencies but because of her power, which the reformers, most notably Kang Youwei, were attempting to seize for themselves. Whether or not we choose to look back on these actions as “right” or “wrong” must be determined by judging Cixi in the appropriate context. She was, after all, a monarch. It is wrong for the historical record to chastise this leader for simply maintaining power and guaranteeing her future safety. If it could be proven that these reformers, in charge of the government, were going to be successful in creating positive change in China, then perhaps we could look back at this moment with sadness as a missed opportunity—but we still could not judge the Dowager for doing what is rightfully expected of a monarch whose power is being challenged. In fact, it seems that this monarch acted altruistically by putting the needs of her country first in September of 1898.

There seems to be a lot of debate and controversy over the events of 1898. The secrecy and isolation of the Forbidden City only adds to the muddle. As recently as 1976, with the death of communist leader Mao Zedong, a gold mine of new archival materials has become available to historians. Jung Chang and Young Tsu-Wong have both made use of these sources and their findings are new and intriguing. Despite the groundbreaking nature of these findings, many of their arguments can be accepted based on their consistency with other sources. Further research employing these newly accessible resources is still required in order to
further substantiate these incredible arguments, and perhaps also to correct other episodes of Chinese history that have been inaccurately recorded.