

Jeremiah: Hello and welcome to another edition of *Barbarians at the Gate*. This is Jeremiah Jenne broadcasting well from Beijing, back for the first time in many a month. Here I am, actually sitting across the table from my co-host and esteemed colleague, David Moser. David, how are you doing?

David: Good. It's good to see you and not just hear your stentorian voice. It's very nice to be here. And it's a lovely day in Beijing.

Jeremiah: The November winds are cool and crisp, but it has been sunny the entire time I've been here, and I have enjoyed my time back in the old town.

David: I just realized I just came back from Ethiopia, and you just came back to Beijing for the first time in a long time. We both faced this problem of resuscitating and reconstituting our apps, WeChat, and all the different things. For me, it was worse. For the first few days, I just was not a human being. I couldn't take a cab. I couldn't do anything. You probably didn't have it as bad, but it's quite a thing when you come back and you have to readjust and get everything back in play.

Jeremiah: WeChat doesn't recognize my face. The airport security recognizes my face. I assume other security forces recognize my face. WeChat does not. So I am forced to use Alipay.

David: Yeah. Anyway. Crazy times. Just as a timestamp, the big Trump-Epstein fiasco is at its height right now. And I found something on Twitter that was very interesting. You know, history doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme, as people say.

Jeremiah: So, as Paul French says.

David: This is from Twitter, and I thought this was an interesting sort of rhyme with the late Qing and where the United States under Trump is right now. So here are the aspects: Number one, flooded with opioids, closing up to foreign trade, the Navy rotten to the core, the government in paralysis, misuse of military funding, governors ignoring central orders and throwing birthday parties for the emperor, and of course, fixing up imperial gardens—i.e., the East Wing of the White House.

Jeremiah: Well, that seems like a pretty damning indictment of the current state of the United States, and frankly, not a totally unfair one. But here, let me turn this around. Is it a particularly fair indictment of the late Qing? And if we're going to talk about fixing up gardens, birthday parties, and general rumors and reputation of malfeasance, can we go much further than the Empress Dowager, who is blamed, or gets most of the blame, for the fall of the dynasty? Of course, there's always this trope, David, in any history—particularly in Chinese history—that when things are going horribly, horribly wrong, historians (particularly male historians) usually identify an ambitious woman and blame everything on her. Why don't we dive into her life and times and see? Does she deserve all the blame that is given to her by historians and by many people today?

David: You know, I'm not very good at following movie plots and everything, so I get very confused when I read about how **Cixi (Cíxǐ, 慈禧, 1835–1908)** took power. So here's a Beijing girl, grew up in Beijing. She's sixteen when she enters as an imperial consort. And she's in her late teens and twenties when she's rising into power. How in the world did this happen?

Jeremiah: Well, you're correct, she is a Beijing girl. Her childhood home is a kindergarten just next to Wangfujing today, for those of you who know Beijing a little bit. Yes, she joined the court of the **Xianfeng Emperor (Xiánfēng Dì, 咸豐帝, 1831–1861)** at a rather young age. And her story really picks up where we left off in an earlier episode with the burning of the Yuanmingyuan. Maybe we can start there because this is really where she emerges from one of the concubines to somebody who would become one of the most famous women in the world.

So for those of you who remember the Old Summer Palace, the Yuanmingyuan was burned during the Anglo-French expedition of 1860. This was when the British and French came to Beijing, and they torched the palaces or the summer palaces of the Emperor.

Of course, the Xianfeng Emperor wasn't here when they did that. As soon as the British and French approached the city, he flees the capital, turning to his little brother **Yixin, also known as Prince Gong (Gōng Qīnwáng Yìxīn, 恭親王奕訢, 1833–1898)**, and says, "Prince Gong, how you doing? Bro, I've got some vacation time saved up. I gotta use it. Otherwise, HR is gonna take it away from me. So here's the thing. I'm going to be going out of town for a few weeks. A couple of things I need you to do for me. Feed the fish in the Forbidden City. New dumpling recipe in the kitchen? Not wild about it. Execute the chef. Oh, yeah. Massive army of hairy barbarians about to sack our capital. And, I mentioned the fish."

The Xianfeng Emperor and his court, including the woman who we know as the Empress Dowager Cixi and all of his cronies, head up beyond the Great Wall, beyond the mountains, to the Imperial Villa at Chengde today. Prince Gong is left to clean up this mess. And then the Xianfeng Emperor never comes home. He dies up there. Some people say it was smallpox. Some people say it was a stroke. Some people say it was a broken heart at learning that his palaces had been destroyed by the hairy barbarians. Other accounts say he drank himself to death with all of his cronies up there. And so in 1861, less than a year after the burning of the Summer Palaces, the Xianfeng Emperor dies up in his imperial villa, which is a real problem for the court, because who usually takes over when the Emperor dies?

David: Well, one of the sons, if there is one.

Jeremiah: And there was one. The problem was the son was four years old, and all of the emperor's cronies, slash drinking buddies up there in the villa with him, were like, "This is going to be awesome. We'll be the regents for this four-year-old on the throne. We're going to rob this place blind." But what they did not count on was the boy's

mother, who turned out to be one of the most ruthless and cunning political minds of the nineteenth, or really any other century. And frankly, a woman who was not so much an empress dowager as straight-up gangster Al Capone in a silk dress. And I don't think this group of officials, cronies, and regents really knew who they were about to mess with.

David: Yeah. For someone so young. So, how old would she have been when the Xianfeng Emperor died?

Jeremiah: You were right. She's like early-mid twenties or thereabouts. And the Emperor himself wasn't that old either. He was only thirty or thirty-one when he died. So this is actually a young crew. So here, for those of you out there who are ever wondering how you carry out a palace coup in China, you're going to need three things to take power. In this particular case, you're going to need first the actual emperor—physical possession of the monarch. And if the monarch is portable, so much the better. And here our subject, the Empress Dowager Cixi, had the kid. But just having the kid isn't enough. Because in order for the kid to issue any kind of edicts, or edicts in the kid's name, what else do you need?

David: You need someone to make the seals.

Jeremiah: Exactly. And it turns out there was a co-empress **Ci'an (Cí'ān, 慈安, 1837–1881)**, the first wife of the Xianfeng Emperor. She was 1-A; Cixi was 1-B. Well, this other Empress Ci'an, she's got the seal. So now the two empresses look at each other and they're like, "Okay, I've got the kid, you've got the Seals. We can start issuing orders in the name of the kid made official with the seals, including arresting and executing or exiling all of the Emperor's cronies who think they're actually in charge." But you can issue orders for arresting people, but you still need someone to do the arresting. And that's when everybody remembered...

David: Prince Gong.

Jeremiah: Who was back there at the capital in charge of the Imperial Guard. And so he works to round up all of the other regents, leaving these three young people in charge: Prince Gong, Ci'an, and Cixi. And the average age of these three conspirators is about twenty-five. That's pretty remarkable in Chinese history. You don't really see a lot of twenty-somethings coming together to carry out any kind of major palace upheaval.

David: So they've been very clever and maybe very lucky, but they've taken power and they have this very young emperor. How in the world is this emperor going to rule, a four-year-old kid?

Jeremiah: Obviously, he's not going to be able to do anything. There's going to need to be some kind of Regency. And the challenge, of course, is the two people who really push this conspiracy, the boy's mother, Cixi, and the other Empress Ci'an, they're women. They really can't be at court. So they've got to be behind a screen.

They need a front man. They need somebody out there to actually meet people. And of course, that's where Prince Gong, who is the Emperor's uncle and part of the conspiracy, comes in handy. So for the first few years, this is how they do it. The two empresses behind the screen, Prince Gong out front. People come in and they look around. They're like, "Hey, Prince Gong, how you doing?" And the empresses are listening behind the screens. The dynamic, of course, is a little bit weird because people say, "Well, Prince Gong, should we raise taxes?" And Prince Gong really has so many great qualities. He's a great project manager type mentality. You put him in charge of creating a proto-foreign ministry; he'll do a really good job at that. But like C-suite level leadership, he doesn't have that gene and he gets very nervous in that role. So people come in and they ask him questions like, "Oh, Prince Gong, should we raise taxes?" And he's there like, "Well, I don't know, should we raise taxes? Should we raise taxes? Hey, back there, should we raise taxes?" And back there? The two Empress Dowagers are looking at each other going, "Raise taxes, you idiot."

David: So actually Prince Gong didn't have that kind of authority or that kind of personality. This is a bizarre setup. And would they actually address the emperor and then the proxies in the back would talk? Or how did this thing arise? Because it's such an absurd kind of surreal situation.

Jeremiah: Well, it's a regency. The idea is that the emperor is not fit to rule until he becomes of age. Prince Gong isn't particularly suited to that role. And the two Empress Dowagers, Ci'an and Cixi, they have very different leadership styles. Cixi, as we know, is a political animal. She loves this stuff and she is very active, very energetic, very engaged in the beginning. The other empress, Empress Ci'an, who was the childless first wife of the Xianfeng Emperor, has a leadership style that we in the twenty-first century will refer to as horrifically passive-aggressive. So in any discussion, Cixi is like, "Well, are we raising taxes?" Ci'an is like, "Ah, I don't know. Just whatever you think. You know, I feel like *you* want to raise taxes. And if you want to raise taxes and I feel like this year you really should be doing you... And so, you know, whatever I think, we'll just let you kind of decide that." And if any of you out there have ever worked with somebody like this for any length of time, you too will eventually want to poison them in their sleep. Not to give anything away somewhere down the episode.

David: So this strange format with the **Tongzhi Emperor (Tóngzhì Dì, 同治帝, 1856–1875)**... Did this continue on? How long did this go on?

Jeremiah: Well, it went on for a while. He's a very young boy. But of course, he's growing up. And the challenge with the Tongzhi Emperor—the reign name of this young boy who was growing up—is that, by all accounts, he grows up a little bit weird. And so they're a little concerned about what kind of emperor he's going to be.

David: I thought he was, you know, visiting prostitutes in back alleys of Beijing.

Jeremiah: Yeah. This is where it's hard to know, because there are all kinds of stories about this kid: that he was not a good student, that he didn't want to learn, that he was

much more interested in pursuits of pleasure, particularly by the time he hits his teenage years.

David: Our President Trump.

Jeremiah: More like Eric. And so there's a little concern about what happens when he finally gets old enough to be an emperor. And the way this works historically is you get married. And once you take a bride or you take an empress, that usually is a signal that you've reached your age of majority. And that happens in 1873. So he's about seventeen years old. And he officially chooses a bride—not the bride his mom Cixi wants for him, but the bride that the other Empress Dowager, Ci'an, totally thought he should be with. And this is a bit of the dynamic there too. Mom is tough on her son. She's a tough mother. Ci'an is sort of the nice stepmother; whenever he doesn't want to study, he runs off to her quarters and she spoils him and hides him. Any parent out there will know how annoying that could be.

And so Cixi is not a fan of her son's bride. She's concerned about her son as a leader. Fortunately for everybody involved, except the young emperor and his new bride, it all works itself out because he dies at seventeen, probably of smallpox. Although there are persistent rumors started—by whom we don't know—that he may have, uh, what's the official term? "Diluted or expended too much of the imperial essences by visiting the pleasure quarters." I leave it to your imagination, David, what that would possibly be. And so now there is no emperor, and they have to go back. And well, who do they choose? He dies without an heir. And this is where...

David: Another boy emperor.

Jeremiah: Yeah, well, that's the thing. Hopefully, you would try to find somebody who was old enough to take power. But that's not really the way Cixi wants to do it. She wants a do-over. And so what she does is she chooses as the new emperor, the son of one of her closest cronies, who also just happens to be her biological nephew. So the emperor that died, the Tongzhi Emperor, is her son with the Xianfeng Emperor. The new emperor is her nephew because one of her sisters married one of the other imperial princes. And so this is her sister's son. So it's not only her son's cousin through the male line, it is her biological nephew through her sister.

David: Did she have to sort of legally adopt this new boy?

Jeremiah: Oh, it was just a complete mess. Think about this. In ancestor worship, you venerate your ancestors. In the imperial sacrifices, you're venerating your ancestors. Your cousin is not your ancestor; your cousin is your cousin. So they had to come up with this very convoluted family tree. It was something like, when the new **Guangxu Emperor (Guāngxù Dì, 光緒帝, 1871–1908)** actually has a new heir, the heir will be posthumously adopted by the previous emperor. It's all a mess. It's a testament, though, to the fact that by this point, by 1874–1875, Cixi has become so powerful that she's able to push this through when it is going against almost every possible rule of succession. And the only reason she wants to do this is because she wants a do-over, and she

wants a child that she can control. Also, the fact that it's her biological nephew makes her once again a choice for regent. If her son had had an heir, he would have been emperor, but he did not. And in fact, his bride, the one that she did not like, was so distraught over losing her husband that just a few months after the death of the Tongzhi Emperor, she commits suicide.

David: Yeah, lots of suicides here.

Jeremiah: Lots of suicides. Yeah. And she was probably, they say, with child when she died. And this is a big deal, because if that baby had been born, even after the Tongzhi Emperor died, then that young woman would have been the new Empress Dowager. Yes. Cixi? Ci'an? Bye! There's a nice cold palace waiting for you. Probably not a cold palace, but I mean, there's a retirement palace waiting for you.

David: So anyway, you have another boy emperor. Does the official visitations with the two dowagers behind the curtain format occur again with the young emperor or what?

Jeremiah: Yeah, this is about the point, though, by the 1870s, where Cixi and Ci'an have shuffled Prince Gong off to deal with many, many projects, and they are no longer really ruling from behind the screen as much as they used to. It's pretty clear who's in charge. Official documents refer to "the court says," but everyone knows who's in charge. And it gets even more clear who's in charge when a few years after this whole fiasco with the new emperor—the cousin who goes on to rule as the Guangxu Emperor—the other Empress Dowager, Ci'an, goes to bed one night at the age of forty-five and mysteriously doesn't wake up. It was apparently a stroke, but I think it's far more likely the cause of death was Cixi just being sick of her shit. As will happen.

So at this point, by the 1870s, by 1880, we have a second of two child emperors on the throne and the Empress Dowager Cixi. This woman has emerged not just as one of these conspirators, not just as the boy's mother who has to negotiate with the other regents. She is seen by all as the real power behind everything that's going on in the Qing Empire.

David: And basically continued so until her death.

Jeremiah: That's right. And it's real. One of the interesting things about her is how she makes connections with key institutions in the imperial household, like the Clan Court, which monitors family behaviors, and important members of the army. The eunuchs are often on her side. That's a very important thing in a palace.

David: And of course, the head eunuch Li Lianying (李蓮英) was probably second in command for a lot of issues.

Jeremiah: She had a history of having eunuch hatchet men. She had a eunuch named An Dehai.

David: Why isn't... There are rumors that she had not a love affair, but she was certainly infatuated with him. And when he was killed, she went into a dark, dark period of depression. Right?

Jeremiah: Especially because there are rumors that it was Prince Gong and Ci'an who were behind having him killed. So that's yet another reason why she was not a fan, especially of Ci'an. But yes, she utilizes the eunuchs. But I also think, and this is again a bit of speculation, but it does seem like she had a superpower. In almost all the descriptions we have of her—we do have some firsthand accounts of people who have met her, both in Chinese and in English—one thing almost everyone talks about is that when she looked at you, it felt like she was looking through your eyes, through your head, and out the back of your skull. She just seemed to be one of those people who had an extraordinary amount of emotional intelligence but used it for dark purposes. She would just know what you feared, what you loved, what motivated you. She could find the little pain points in everybody's psyche, and she knew how to press those buttons. And she would do it to everybody. She would emotionally bitch-slap everybody in court such that nobody knew whose side she was on, where they stood. And it was terrible for the function of a court because everyone's on edge and everyone's suspecting everybody else. But if you're at the center of this web, it's great for you.

And I do think that, yes, institutions matter, but there was something about her personally that seemed to also really allow her to take power and hold that power. In 1895, which would be her sixtieth birthday—and of course, sixty being a big year in China—she takes advantage of that moment. It's a terrible year for China because they've just lost a war to Japan. But she's taking advantage of the moment to, in some ways, retire. She spent all of her time and an awful lot of the court's money renovating the Summer Palace.

David: Stone boat and all of that.

Jeremiah: Yeah, the famous story where she took the Navy's budget to renovate a marble boat that doesn't go anywhere. That is certainly hard to beat as a metaphor.

I'm not justifying her spending all that money on the Summer Palace. There is a way of looking at this that at least makes it make more sense, which is this: she is the at least de facto ruler of a dynasty that came to power based on conquest. They've stayed in power because they have this martial mystique about them. It may have waned in the nineteenth century, but that was still the whole point of the Manchus and the Qing. Now the British and French came in and they burned down their house. And I think one of the reasons why she wanted to rebuild, and rebuild so fast, was because it's a little bit like 9/11. Once it was destroyed, you have to rebuild it just to restore some sense that you haven't completely been beaten. And I think that was a big part of it as well. But it was very expensive. The court obviously had other financial priorities, but by 1895 she restored these gardens to be a nice place for her in retirement.

And the young Guangxu Emperor gets married. Which means, of course, that he will reach his majority. And he gets married to a woman who is known in history as the

Empress Longyu. This time around, Cixi made sure that nobody else chose this bride other than her. And she chose this woman for the Guangxu Emperor. By all accounts, the two of them did not get along. He thought she was just mini-Cixi in training, and she probably was. He thought she was reporting everything they did to Cixi, and she probably did. And so his reign where he is the emperor is off to a rocky start.

I mentioned that 1895 was a tough year because you had the Sino-Japanese War. It was also a special year here in Beijing. Every three years, all the scholars from all over China come to Beijing. David, can you imagine what that would be like? I know it's a serious business, the imperial exams. But every aspiring intellectual twenty-something from all over the empire, the top of the tops, pour into town for a period of time. Can you imagine being a fly on the wall in some of those taverns, brothels, guild halls? And of course, everyone's talking about the war, and many of these young men are saying to themselves, "Well, you know, the emperor is a young guy, too. Why don't we do a petition? We'll enlist him in our cause and the cause of reforms." Some of these young men become quite famous. People like **Liang Qichao (Liáng Qǐchāo, 梁啟超, 1873–1929)**, **Kang Youwei (Kāng Yǒuwéi, 康有為, 1858–1927)**, **Tan Sitong (Tán Sítóng, 譚嗣同, 1865–1898)** and others. So they write a petition. It's a pretty dangerous thing to do. But they write up this petition and it gets circulating. Now the Emperor doesn't see it right away. It's not like they're just going to mail it to the Forbidden City. It turns out that the Guangxu Emperor had some ideas of his own. And in 1898, he finally kind of gets ahold of this petition. He sees this petition and he's like, "These are my people." And so he invites people like Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and others to come to the Forbidden City in the summer of 1898 for reform summer camp. And for roughly a hundred days, they streamline the bureaucracy, cut all the dead weight, modernize the military. And, you know, they were even talking in some ways about moving towards something that looked like a constitutional monarchy.

If they had asked the Empress Dowager, she would have told them, "You're moving too fast." I think this is one of the things people misunderstand about her. They're like, "She was this reactionary woman who hated anything that was modern." I don't think that's technically true. I think she was very conservative, but in the classic sense of conservative. Which means when you tell her about something you want to change, her first thought would be, "If we do this, what are the possible unintended consequences of this?" And yes, she was extraordinarily conservative. But what ends up happening with her nephew and all of his friends trying to change it all at once is, of course, they do anger everybody, and a lot of those people are angry. And they go to her and they say, "Listen, Cixi. I love what you've done with the Summer Palace. Great marble boat. Have you seen what your nephew's been doing while you've been up here sipping tea?" And she's like, "No, do tell." And they told her and she was displeased.

David: So the Tongzhi Restoration was really about restoring the former glory, keeping the Confucian classics, but also this *ti/yong* 體用 (中體西用) dichotomy, which is that we keep the Chinese system, the Chinese worldview, the Chinese tradition as the guiding

force, as the core values. And then the *Yong* 用, the usefulness of foreign technology. So it was going to keep "Chineseness" intact, but to add some foreign technology. Whereas this new one, which was only one hundred days, was very different in a way. It was actually trying to do a deeper kind of reform to actually do away with some of the stale, outmoded Confucian models, incorporate some Western models, and really do deep reform. And Cixi, of course, was hearing these complaints.

Jeremiah: Yeah, I think both in the Tongzhi era and the self-strengthening, they had this idea of *zhongtixiyong* (中體西用) and for them, I think the *xiyong* (西用) was very much about the technical aspects of it. And the reason why is because anytime they got beyond technical aspects, it started to impinge on the *ti* 體 (Chinese essence). What I think the innovation, if you will, of the Hundred Days reformers—particularly Kang Youwei—was to stretch the *ti* (Chinese essence) so broadly that it could fit over whatever they said it would fit over. And you know, he famously wrote an essay called "Confucius as a Reformer." So I think they're going beyond what the Self-Strengtheners would have wanted, because now they're actually messing with the essence.

Many people were upset by what's going on, and when Kang Youwei, these other reformers, and the Guangxu Emperor learned that the Empress Dowager and some of her allies were gunning for them, they reached out to yet another young reformer, someone also their age, who was a military man, a man who has gone on to become really the Forrest Gump of bad decisions in modern Chinese history. And of course, we refer to **Yuan Shikai (Yuán Shìkǎi, 袁世凱, 1859–1916)**. Yuan Shikai was a military man, he was a relatively young reformer, and he is brought into this Hundred Days reforms. And they say, "Listen, the emperor has all these plans. The Empress Dowager and her allies may be coming for him. You've got the military. Would you help to support us?" And he says, "I will absolutely listen to what you have to say, and I'll be right back. I gotta run an errand." He goes and basically tells his allies what's brewing, and she is even more displeased. And then in a rather dramatic turn of events, she shows up at the Forbidden City with her Praetorian Guard, and many of the reformers have to flee into exile. Some are executed, and the emperor is put under house arrest in 1898, a situation that he will remain in for the next ten years, or, as we'll find out, the rest of his life.

And this is where the story goes from bad to worse, if it's possible. So, David, we spoke with Jeffrey Wasserstrom last year regarding the Boxer War. A major event takes place. A lot of it takes place around where we are right here in Beijing. And during the Boxer War, of course, groups of anti-foreign secret societies emerged in North China. They threaten the foreign communities in places like Beijing, Shandong, Tianjin.

David: With Cixi's approval. She was very much on their side, a tacit approval. She was very much in favor of what they were doing, due to her sort of anti-foreign sentiment.

Jeremiah: Yeah. I think I mentioned this when we did the Boxer War episode, but I would have loved to have heard that conversation as some of her officials come to her

and say, "Empress Dowager. These boxers are killing all the foreigners. They're rampaging in the streets." And then, total silence. "I'm sorry. Maybe you didn't hear me. Anti-Foreign secret societies rampaging in the streets, killing the foreigners." "I heard you, son. I just don't really see what the problem is here."

Sure, the Boxer uprising becomes a major event, as everybody in China will tell you from primary school on up. Eight different countries send troops to occupy North China. And in a bit of a repeat of 1860, when the troops are marching on Beijing, the Empress Dowager Cixi prepares to flee the capital, and she's not going to leave the Guangxu Emperor behind, in large part because she's worried that the foreigners will set him up as a puppet emperor.

David: The Guangxu Emperor didn't really like his wife. It was forced upon him. But he did have a girlfriend. So here's the case. They're having to flee the capital, but of course... what about Zhenfei 珍妃 (The Pearl Concubine)?

Jeremiah: The Pearl Concubine. She had a sister who was the Jade Concubine. And they were part of this menagerie, if you will. And yes, it does seem like the Guangxu Emperor and Zhenfei (The Pearl Concubine) had a real relationship—that she was often trying to encourage him to be stronger, stand up to his aunt, which I'm sure endeared her to Cixi. And she was not popular with the other women in court. So as they're preparing to flee the court and bring the Guangxu Emperor with them, Cixi decides to do a little housekeeping. And we're not totally sure of how this happens. But before they leave town, Zhenfei, this concubine, the love of the Guangxu Emperor's life, ends up at the bottom of a well in the Forbidden City.

David: So some say that it was Cixi Taihou (Empress Dowager Cixi) who threw her into the well. Some say she committed suicide. Probably the excuse was that, "Oh, these foreign soldiers will be coming in, and you're a beautiful young girl, and you don't want this to happen to you." And so she may have just committed suicide. But at any rate, all of this might be due to our friend Edmund Backhouse, who wrote outlandish things about that. And he may have had some inside knowledge of this, I don't know.

Jeremiah: Well, Edmund Backhouse is somebody who probably deserves a couple of episodes of his own, but he was a very famous linguist, a sort of cosplaying cross between Oscar Wilde and a Manchu scholar who haunted the hutongs of Beijing for decades and was famous not just for his ability with languages, but for making up all kinds of stories and selling them to gullible journalists and authors. So he's not necessarily reliable. He was at one time the most authoritative source on the life of the Empress Dowager Cixi. He's probably no longer considered to be that reliable, particularly since he, among other things, claimed to be her lover on many occasions.

David: His book is very much fun.

Jeremiah: Yes, I will actually be reviewing that book for *China Books Review* coming up, and we will talk about a book so pornographic it was written in the 1940s but not released till 2011.

So you can imagine the poor Guangxu emperor, who now has lost his girlfriend, lost basically his throne. He's under house arrest. They're on the run. Finally, after a couple of years of exile in western China around Xi'an, they all come back and the Empress Dowager puts the Guangxu Emperor back in his gilded cage and looks around the room to her officials—what's left of them—and says, "Listen, guys, that sucked. We need to make some changes around here." And so her guys get together, they pull out the whiteboard and they're like, "Okay, we've got a plan." She goes, "Great, lay it on me." "Well, we're going to do a series of reforms in which we streamline the bureaucracy, modernize the military, and move towards a constitutional monarchy." And you can only imagine the poor Guangxu Emperor in his captivity, as nice as it is, hearing all about these plans and thinking to himself, "She's going to do *what* now? Like anyone here who had these ideas five years ago? Maybe like anyone? Am I the only one here raising my hand? Yes, I am."

And the thing is, he might have been right. Because if those reforms had been pushed through in 1898 with a young emperor and young reformers, and there had been no Boxer debacle, maybe they would have stuck. But at this point—and maybe we're dating this episode now to a very specific moment—but at this point, the fact that the Empress Dowager Cixi and some of these conservative officials are agreeing to reform, it just feels like they were forced into it. And again, maybe we're dating ourselves here, but it feels so much like Donald Trump saying, "Absolutely, release the Epstein files."

David: That's right.

Jeremiah: Because, you know, the only reason they do is because there's no other way out. They just go in that direction.

David: Probably too late.

Jeremiah: Probably too late. But these reforms, they weren't bad reforms.

David: Yeah, exactly.

Jeremiah: And it might have just been, as you said, too little, too late. And then, of course, in 1908, the Empress Dowager is on her deathbed. She's seventy-three. Which, compared to other Qing emperors, if she was considered an official ruler—and she's not—but seventy-three would have made her the second oldest person to rule the Qing Empire after the Qianlong Emperor. And forty-eight years would have been the third longest period of rule for the Qing Empire. But as she's on her deathbed, she does not want to leave behind the Guangxu Emperor because this emperor this entire time, since his days of captivity, since the days when his favorite concubine was murdered, he's been just biding his time. He's studying a little English. He's studying a little German. He just knows he has to outlive her. And then everything will be fine.

But days, hours, really, before she dies, he dies. Not so mysteriously. And for a long time, it was mysterious. For a long time, his death, just days before the Empress Dowager in November 1908, was thought to be, well, we just don't know. Like the death of Ci'an or a lot of the other deaths around this woman. But in 2008, researchers from

China went to the Qing tombs and exhumed some of the burial material, some of the remains of the Guangxu Emperor. And they found off-the-charts levels of arsenic, which, when you compare it with the notes for what his breakfast was, would suggest—if we're going to do the game of Clue—it was the eunuch with a bowl of yogurt and arsenic in the actually Zhongnanhai, which was where he was being kept. In fact, the Guangxu Emperor's prison is the same island where we're not supposed to know this, but Xi Jinping currently lives.

David: Oh, okay. That's interesting. Yeah.

Jeremiah: There's that little island in Nanhai that sticks out there, and we're not supposed to know this, but by most people's accounts, that's where Xi Jinping lives. Yeah, that was where his prison was.

David: A great pharmacist. She had these different poisons and things to deliver her.

Jeremiah: Well, I mean, it's arsenic. Classics are classics for a reason. Don't mess around with fancy stuff. Just go with what works.

David: My question is, how is Cixi perceived right now? During... I know that after that and certainly under Mao, she was vilified. You know, she was a complete witch. But Jung Chang (Zhang Rong 張榮) wrote this book about Cixi Taihou and actually sort of pictured her as a feminist icon and a liberal reformer who had done much, you know, kept China unified and done this sort of hagiography. It's just ridiculous. But is there some more nuance to the way of looking at Cixi Tiahou at the current time? Like the average person, but also how does the government see her? How much of her is in the history books?

Jeremiah: I think she will still be perceived as a classic example of the decadence of the "feudal" system, that she's a symbol of all the corruption that made China so weak and easy to be preyed upon by the foreign powers. And of course, the people who... if you go to the Summer Palace and you see the marble boat and the way it's described, the way it's talked about in the textbooks, I don't think she's going to be rehabilitated anytime soon. And Jung Chang's book about the Empress Dowager is wonderful speculation. I think it would have made a great work of historical fiction, and I mean that as kindly as I can. What if we got it all wrong? You know, kind of like that movie about Cruella de Vil. It turns out that she's not that bad, even though she killed all the puppies. But if you're going to do a 180 on a historical paradigm, you got to really bring the evidence. And she just didn't do it in that book.

David: I think it's complex. I mean, she was a survivor. She was a woman in a very, very patriarchal system. The most there is, practically. And she was also highly intelligent and highly ambitious. For heaven's sake, you know, there are men that do the same kinds of villainous things. They're not just Al Capone, but sometimes there can be presidents that do this sort of thing, you know? So I think probably nuance is the way. She also had certain sides of her... There's this book written by Der Ling (Yü Deling 裕

德齡), her lady-in-waiting, I guess you would call it, who was bilingual. You know, I've read that book and she comes off as... of course, she's very biased; the dowager was like her aunt or something like that. She comes across as having a sense of humor, as being very generous. And she also, despite all the bad blood China had with foreigners, Cixi Taihou was probably the most welcoming of all emperors to allow foreigners to come into the Forbidden City to have dinners with her. To have watched Peking operas. Katherine Carl, who painted a portrait of her, which is very interesting. And she came across as someone who was interested in foreign ideas. This book I tell with Der Ling lady in waiting... that she would actually put on gramophone records of waltzes and teach this... to do the waltz and stuff like that. So she had a human side. She could be generous. She could be sweet, you know. As with every tyrant, they have a human side. And she certainly had one. Obviously.

Jeremiah: Okay. I'm not trying to rehabilitate her or to make her seem like she's a nice person. That's not what... again, she was straight-up gangster. But I think you made a good point that the number of people that she probably had killed, compared to some of her male counterparts in Chinese history, is at least equal, if actually probably on the low side. So there's that. I also think that she was ruling at a time where the rot had set in so much in the court, and the aggression and the capabilities of the foreign powers to exert their influence in China was so significant that I wonder if even the Kangxi Emperor or Han Wudi or anyone could have really made that much of a difference. Maybe they could have. So I'm not saying every decision she made was good. A lot of the decisions she made were quite poor.

I do think she gets judged by a few key moments where she does not look good. Depending upon how you look at the Hundred Days Reforms, that was definitely a sliding doors moment where things could have been very different if she had allowed that to go on. Her tacit approval of the Boxers... I don't know if that would have changed things, but certainly, if she had come down against them, which I doubt she would have done because at this point, where would she have gone? But that could have changed things.

I think the other thing, the one decision that she gets particularly and rightfully criticized for, was her decision right after the death or the poisoning of the Guangxu Emperor, her nephew. You know, he dies just days, hours really, before she does, which gave her just enough time to nominate yet another emperor. She chooses the three-year-old, two-year-old son of one of her close cronies. And of course, this is the last emperor, Puyi. And the Qing Empire started so well because between 1661 and 1799, you really had three emperors. If you want to have a dynasty succeed early on, have long reigns of adult emperors. If you want to kill a dynasty—and this doesn't matter if it's China or anywhere in the world—put a series of kids on the throne. A lot of the decisions she made were not great. There are some real, there are some big ones that she definitely blew. And I think that for that reason, she's rightly criticized in Chinese history.

But as you said, there's some nuance there. This idea of the scheming, diabolical Dragon Lady that is part of her reputation... I think that's just a very unfortunate

confluence of stereotyping from two directions. One, any woman in power in Chinese history, you hear the same stories: ambitious, violent, cruel to the children, sexually salacious. And when you start hearing the same stories over and over again about different people and different times, you know that there's more trope than truth to what's going on. And then from the Western side, she just fits so perfectly every possible stereotype of an oriental despot. You know, here's this woman hiding in the palace with her long fingernails. I mean, she's somebody that if she didn't exist, orientalist writers would have invented her.

David: That's true.

Jeremiah: So, as I said, in no way do I want to completely rehabilitate her. But I do think we need to consider the nuance when we're talking about this person and think about some of the context in terms of how her story has been written and how her story has been remembered.

David: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And she was a survivor. I mean, I think that was part of it. Gangsters become gangsters because they live in environments that you have to become a gangster to survive, you know?

Jeremiah: It takes a certain amount of smarts to survive. There's another odd thing I'll hear like, "She was this stupid, illiterate woman." And first of all, she was not illiterate. I mean, she was not particularly literary, but she was definitely literate. But also, you can't stay in power as a woman at the Qing court for forty-eight years unless you have some kind of intelligence. It might not have been the kind that can quote the *Book of Rites* from memory, but it's something.

David: Yeah, absolutely.

Jeremiah: Well, David, there we have it. Sex, violence, true crime, intrigue, political conspiracies. Have I gotten all the SEO buzzwords that are going to automatically increase our rankings in the podcast files?

David: Talking about the current Trump administration, right?

Jeremiah: Well, as you started off, there do seem to be some similarities. If Melania takes over with Barron as her puppet...

David: It couldn't be worse than it is now.

Jeremiah: We say this from the relative safety of Beijing, but yeah, it could definitely be worse. Well, thank you all for listening. Tune in again to another episode of *Barbarians at the Gate*. This is Jeremiah. He is David. And as always, cue the drums.