ForeWord Reviews

Dragon of Heaven: The Memoirs of the Last Empress of China
David Bouchard
Raincoast Books
978-1-55192-525-7
(Aug 20, 2003)

Was Empress Dowager Cixi, the last reigning Empress of China, a cold-blooded murderer who would do anything to gain a little more power? Or was she a resolute victim of the turmoil that swept China at the beginning of the twentieth century?

This fictionalized memoir of this controversial historical figure suggests that there may be truth in both of these statements. History has not been kind to Cixi, the "Old Buddha," and certainly her reign is associated with acts of dubious morality. The author's retelling of her life, however, lends an air of humanity to her character that is often lacking in more scholarly works.

Cixi was one of only three women over the entire twenty-two centuries of China's imperial history to rule the empire. From her early life as a favorite concubine of Emperor Xianfeng to her death, old, alone and bitter, Cixi was not content in her prescribed role as a docile vessel for imperial heirs. Instead, she bent history to her will, using her status as Holy Mother to place her choice of men on the throne and ruling through them from "behind the bamboo curtain." Needless to say, though Emperors Tongzhi and Guangxu led China during Cixi's lifetime, there was no question as to who really held the power in the Forbidden City.

The author is a well-known writer of illustrated children's books, and in Dragon of Heaven, he is joined by a renowned painter born in China. The twenty-five oil paintings that illustrator Huang created for this book perfectly complement Bouchard's subtle text. In his commentary at the end of the book, Huang notes that Cixi was an ambiguous historical personage, and in his paintings he tries to suggest answers to some of the questions about her life. They are meticulously researched, down to such details as the boots Emperor Xianfeng wore.

Despite the outward appearance of Dragon of Heaven, it is not a picture book for children. Details about China's ongoing wars during the late 1800s, opium abuse, eunuchs and questionable executions are too explicit for most children.

Bouchard's imagining of Cixi's life does not gloss over her scheming and xenophobic nature, but it also depicts her as a loyal wife and mother. There were few outlets for women to gain power in imperial China, and perhaps Cixi cannot be blamed for the measures she felt she needed to take to ensure her place. As a portrait of a fascinating and even tragic character,

Dragon of Heaven is a masterpiece.

Johanna Massé