**Dowager’s Struggle**

**Reviewed by Dewi Anggraeni**

**The Last Empress:**
*A Novel*

By Anchee Min

Mariner Books, 336 pages, US$13.95

HISTORIANS BELIEVE THAT if we want to understand the present we must learn from the past. However, time and again we have proven that it is hard to shake off the feeling that the past is something remote and finished, with no relevance to how we live now. So we happily summarize past events, reduce the characters in them to two-dimensional figures easily folded and stashed away in our mental pigeonholes.

Anchee Min’s latest historical novel, *The Last Empress*, which may be read as a sequel to her earlier novel, *Empress Orchid*, reminds us that the past is inhabited by people as real as we are now, and that the force of human nature shaping local, regional and global politics and economics has not changed very much.

The novel is a fascinating story in itself, but placing it in a wider historical context may serve to enhance our understanding and enjoyment of it.

As David Smith tells us in his recent book, *The Dragon and the Elephant*, the China we see now as an emerging economy is actually a reemerging one that 2,000 years ago accounted for 26 percent of the world economy.

If we go back to the Ming Dynasty, between the 12th and 15th centuries, we see a powerful China enlisting states to the east, west and southeast as tributaries, vassals and trading partners. History tells us, of course, that powerful kingdoms rarely remain so, because subsequent generations of rulers become self-indulgent, lack self-discipline and complacently lapse into a narrow world of delusion, believing they are born into eternal power.

*The Last Empress* is the story of a China on a rapid downward slide, staring at the bottom, under
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the Manchu, or Qing, Dynasty during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, while Britain, Germany, France and Japan made their incursions into the country with very little resistance.

This slice of history unscrolls through the eyes of Orchid, Empress Tsu Hsi, who is also known in historical writings in the West as Empress Cixi, the often-despised dowager empress who presided over the last days of the Qing Dynasty. In most historical records, Cixi is portrayed as a depraved ruler and mastermind of evil whose sins lay at the heart of late imperial China’s decay and ruin.

Min offers two reasons Tsu Hsi was so vilified: the West wanted a justification for invading China and plundering its resources, while the Chinese resented her for failing to save what was really a doomed nation. Interestingly, Min did not compose her novel to prove this theory. Rather, almost as an afterthought, she articulated this view of Tsu Hsi’s role in Chinese history in an interview she gave after the publication of *The Last Empress*.

While Min claims she did extensive research on the period — and the book abundantly illustrates that — she uses a novelist’s artistic license to flesh out the characters and events she describes. Because history is interpretive, Min’s version is as believable as any, and with her insight into Chinese psychology and culture, the narrative flows smoothly, with only occasional lapses of credibility.

Tsu Hsi, unlike Britain’s Tudors, was not born into royalty. She was rather “introduced” into power by being the concubine of Qing Emperor Shen Loong, whose first son she bore. With the premature death of Shen Loong in the war against the British, their son Tung Chih, then five years old, ascended the throne. Tsu Hsi along with Nuharoo, Shen Loong’s childless imperial senior wife, became co-regents. Tsu Hsi was very much aware that she became co-regent by virtue of being Tung Chih’s mother. This had a double-edged effect on most of her actions. She knew the limitations as well as the extent of her power.

Tsu Hsi had to obey imperial court protocol and allow Tung Chih to be brought up by Nuharoo, who had very little interest in court business, despite the fact that both she and Tsu Hsi had been tutored in Chinese history and literature, presumably in order to be effective co-regents.

Tsu Hsi, on the other hand, was greatly interested in how China was governed, probably because she knew her son would one day be responsible for ruling China.

She sought knowledge from books with limited success. Striving to understand why men waged war against each other, she read the volumes of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, but drew no satisfaction from them. She then learned about events around her the hard way — by trial and error.

Her sheltered life framed her existence — her most regular outings were to attend court audiences, where the events presented to her had already been modified to suit the party who presented them. She would learn that unless she was prepared to seek information directly and actively,
which was itself extremely difficult, she would never know what was happening, inside or outside the confines of the palace.

Even when she had obtained a fair understanding of a particular important situation, Tsu Hsi found it difficult to counsel her son, Emperor Tung Chih, because whatever strategy she planned would have to be implemented with the approval of the imperial court, which was dominated by the Manchu conservatives, known as the Ironhats. In the meantime, Tung Chih had been conditioned to regard her more as a subordinate than a mother. She described her interactions with her son as “like handling a kite in a capricious wind.”

She tried in vain, even with the support of the relatively progressive-thinking Prince Kung, a younger brother of the late Emperor Shen Loong, to have Tung Chih taught by an English tutor. The imperial court was dead set against it, seeing it as a betrayal. It was too soon after the Opium War with Britain during which Shen Loong had been killed. This would later become one of her deepest regrets, because she saw that Tung Chih’s missed opportunity to learn Western ways and thinking was a detriment to China.

Far from giving up, Tsu Hsi persevered. She worked hard to be consistent without alienating the court in making decisions, and indeed, in matters that were crucial but unpopular, the court was only too happy to let her issue the edicts. An example is when the court decided to execute General Sheng Pao for corruption. Tsu Hsi described her internal struggle when issuing the edict, for the loyal Manchu Bannerman had been instrumental in rescuing her from political defeat in 1861. “My thoughts couldn’t silence an inner voice: Orchid, without Sheng Pao you would not have lived.”

Min’s depiction of the social and political situation is so palpable the reader sometime feels suffocated by the hatred and fear that surrounded Tsu Hsi, who was tightly constrained by her circumstances and both loved and detested.

While Tsu Hsi likened many a situation to “playing a game whose rules I failed to understand. And there was no time to learn them,” throughout the course of her life she did learn, albeit mostly intuitively, because she was not only ruled by her mind. She also left her heart open. What she learned, unfortunately, did not always empower her, but it nonetheless enhanced her understanding of the people around her, and human nature in general.

For example, one morning Tsu Hsi could not hear the whistling of the pigeons. She asked her trusted chief eunuch, An-te-hai, what had happened to the birds. Nervously the eunuch admitted to setting them free, “because the cages don’t suit them.” Tsu Hsi protested that the cages were grand and big, and that An-te-hai should have asked for the carpenters to enlarge the cages if he deemed them not big enough.

“It is not the size, my lady, nor the number of cages.”
“What is it, then?”
“It is the cage itself.”
“It never bothered you before.”
“It does now.”
“Nonsense.”
“The eunuch lowered his head. After a while he uttered, ‘It is painful to be locked up.’”

Far from punishing An-te-hai for subordination, Tsu Hsi engaged him in further dialogue about his view of his life, and learned about his secret ambitions.

Her commoner’s background may have equipped her with the ability to learn from seemingly insignificant conversations with people theoretically inferior to her. And it may also have made her more aware of the difference between puffery and genuine praise, something that eluded many in the imperial court. This astuteness helped her maintain her position, but also placed her out of the box, hence vulnerable to attacks. Meanwhile, the population, in general, regarded her as all powerful and blamed her for bad policy as well as failures to protect them. Curiously, this view was echoed and embellished by foreign press accounts of this remote and seemingly harsh woman.

While Tsu Hsi was depicted as having Tung Chih in her power, in reality, he resented her expectations of him. The young emperor failed to understand the seriousness and urgency of many situations. His classical education seemed irrelevant to the immediate pressure of governing, and what is more, his supposedly high academic achievements were most
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likely fabricated by his tutors, who were eager to retain their positions, even fearful for their lives if they revealed the emperor’s true intellectual capacity. Tsu Hsi’s knowledge of this put her in a very difficult position. She had to prevent Tung Chih from being manipulated by the Ironhats, which forced her to stand up to the conservative court, making her even more unpopular. The Ironhats portrayed her to the general population as the hand that pulled the strings of the puppet emperor. The reality was that even when she had retired from the scene after Tung Chih was old enough to govern on his own, she was often called back because the court relied on her to make decisions, however unfavorable they were to some in the governing elite.

When anything went wrong, Tsu Hsi was blamed, even if she was originally meant to be a victim. For instance, for the dowager empress’ 40th birthday, Tung Chih wanted to restore his mother and late father’s original home, Yuan Ming Yuan, destroyed in the war with Britain. The idea, supported by Prince Kung, was very likely intended to distance Tsu Hsi from court business.

Tung Chih ordered the restoration to begin even before the funding was in place. The project was an unending disaster, plagued by corruption. Yet it was Tsu Hsi who had to absorb the blame. Even Western historical documents described this as an example of Tsu Hsi’s greed and extravagance.

Her close relationships with key military personnel gave her firsthand knowledge of how China’s military power had deteriorated, putting the country in the pathetic situation of being impotent in the face of demands from foreign powers. However, she was unable to make Tung Chih, who had been misinformed by the Ironhats, understand that China had lost its bargaining power and had to acquiesce to even the most undignified and humiliating defeats.

She tried, in vain, to stop the emperor from continuing to wage wars, because she knew that the costs had impoverished China’s population beyond dignity.

The demonization of Tsu Hsi intensified when Tung Chih died prematurely of venereal disease. Despite her own grief, Tsu Hsi had to act quickly to prevent someone from the ultra-conservative camp being selected to take over the throne. She adopted her own nephew, Guang Hsu, and brought him up to replace Tung Chih as emperor. However, Guang Hsu turned out to be another ineffectual ruler, and again Tsu Hsi returned from retirement to engage in court business.

The novel portrays Tsu Hsi as having a mind and psyche capable of transcending the confines of race. Unlike many in the Manchu ruling elite, she trusted their Han military leaders, such as Tseng Kuo Fan and Li Hung Chang, on whom the Ironhats and the two young emperors in their respective days heaped blame and accusations of treachery.

Min also describes Tsu Hsi’s awareness of human nature, when the dowager empress tried unsuccessfully to prevent the Boxer Rebellion. But she was up against a force much bigger than her. When crops failed, the dilapidated infrastructure collapsed and people were starving, they blamed outsiders, especially those who were better off than they were and lorded it over them. It was a combination of a superstitious belief that foreigners cast evil spells on them, and the feeling of being continuously victimized that pushed people over the edge. In spreading terror, the self-appointed warriors indulged in
the romance of invincibility. Then, despite Tsu Hsi's warnings, they attacked the foreign concessions, only to be slaughtered by sophisticated weapons.

Min does not portray Tsu Hsi as faultless. The empress had weaknesses and shortcomings, but was aware of most of them. Her regrets and remorse are movingly painted in the book. In fact, the undercurrent of love and passion between Tsu Hsi and General Yung Lu is a salient feature that tugs at the reader's heart throughout the novel. It was an impossible love affair, which nonetheless was manifested in mutual steadfastness and loyalty throughout their lives.

Like Stephen Bown’s *The Epic Voyage of Captain George Vancouver*, which disputes the vilification of the unfortunate captain on his ill-fated voyage of discovery, *The Last Empress* may well do the same for Orchid, the dowager Empress Tsu Hsi, by fleshing out the characters and events surrounding her life. *The Last Empress* is an important novel for students of Chinese history.

Dewi Anggraeni, a native of Indonesia, is a widely published author of fiction, essays, reviews and articles. Her latest novel is *Snake* (2003), and her most recent non-fiction work is *Dreamseekers: Indonesian Women as Domestic Workers in Asia* (2006). She is Australia correspondent for Jakarta’s *Tempo* news magazine. Her short story, “The Peach Baju Kurung,” appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of *Global Asia*. 