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VENERABLE ANCESTOR

THE LIFE
AND TIMES
OF

TZ'U HSI,

1835-1908,

EMPRESS

OF CHINA

BY

HARRY
HUSSEY

DRAWINGS BY
SHIRLEY WANG



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VENERABLE
ANCESTOR

TO MY GRANDSON

Harry Joseph Hussey

FOREWORD



MY INTEREST in China began with the visit of a missionary to our village in Canada when I was a small boy. The missionary had lived in China for a number of years but had returned to America to unite the Christian churches in what he called the Fourth Crusade, a crusade to conquer China for the Cross as the earlier crusades had attempted to conquer the Holy City. Unlike the earlier crusades his crusade was to be peaceful penetration. But as I now recall that enthusiastic old man and his frequent references and admiration for the armored knights and their victories in Palestine I am afraid it was to be peaceful only because of necessity. I am sure he would have preferred to have led an armed host against what he called the evil forces of Satan in China.

The missionary stayed more than a week in our village, holding daily meetings much like the revival meetings that were so popular at that time. I missed the first one but his story was ably relayed to our family by my father. I showed such an interest in the missionary that I was allowed to attend all the successive meetings. This rather unusual eagerness was mistaken as a hopeful sign of an interest in religion. Unfortunately this was a mistake which my family and the

local church realized soon after the departure of the missionary and the return of my former reluctance toward attending church. As for converting the Chinese, I distinctly recall my fear at that time that the missionary might somehow be able to convert the Chinese and make them like ourselves before I had an opportunity to see them as they were. I later found that I had little need to worry over such a possibility.

While the missionary evidently did not succeed in organizing his Fourth Crusade he did succeed in disorganizing my entire life. He took me out of my peaceful village and made me a wanderer over the face of the earth. He crowded out of my child mind the story of King Arthur and his knights and such other stories I was supposed to read, and replaced them with the *Travels of Marco Polo*, a copy of which had somehow found its way to our village. He made China my first choice among foreign nations. While I have come to know and admire many other foreign countries, China remains today my first choice as the place for a home, with the exception of my mother country Canada. Nor am I alone in this. I have yet to meet the person who has come to know the Chinese who does not admire them, or the person who has lived in Peking for two years or more who does not want to continue living in that city, sometimes for life.

The missionary was a most convincing speaker. Though I have come to know Peking as I know no other city, and the Peking I know is many times more interesting than the city described by the missionary, yet whenever I think of Peking it is the missionary's picture of it that most often comes first to my mind. The picture he painted has stayed with me all these years, even though I later found that his description was more interesting than accurate. He had never actually seen Peking; he told us only what others had told him, but he told it very convincingly. So convincingly that he started me dreaming that someday, somehow, I must see that wondrous city of the Orient—about as improbable a dream for a small boy living in a village in Canada at that time as for a boy of today to dream of someday visiting the moon. But even my wildest dreams did not approach what one day was to be a fact: that Peking, the city of my dreams, would be my home for more than half my life. I knew at that time that it would take a miracle, a miracle as great as any I had ever been told, to make it possible for me even to visit Peking.

But such a miracle did happen.

The miracle was a bomb that dropped from the sky, in the form of a cablegram from Dr. John R. Mott, asking me if I would make a trip to China for his organization. I accepted immediately. I gave up my architectural work which I had so laboriously built up, gave up my home, and everything else I had in America, and never returned to any of them again except for short visits. Within three weeks I was on board the *Tenyo Maru* bound for Shanghai. It was only later that I realized that Dr. Mott had also asked me to visit Japan, Korea, the Philippine Islands, and Russia. It was China that was the magic word in that cablegram.

To make this visit to China even more enjoyable I found that I was to be accompanied by Mr. Fletcher M. Brockman, a Y.M.C.A. secretary and missionary, and one of the finest men I have ever known. I was to work out the plans for a number of buildings that the International Committee of the Y.M.C.A. intended building in the above-mentioned countries. On the boat Mr. Brockman suggested that I also visit as many as possible of the missionaries in China to assist them with the plans for their new buildings. This I gladly agreed to do as a small contribution to the mission work in China. It resulted in my visiting most of the large cities and provinces of China under the guidance of Mr. Brockman, who knew China and the Chinese people as few white men ever did. He seemed to have friends, Chinese friends, everywhere, who took us into their homes and gave me the opportunity to see Chinese family life.

These visits to the inland cities of China proved to be so interesting and enjoyable that for many years, whenever I could get away from Peking, I used such time to make other trips. My only object was to see more and learn more of China and the Chinese people. Most of the trips were made with only an interpreter, a cook, and a mule driver with his cart—the famous Peking cart. I tried to avoid all foreigners, preferring to spend the nights in Chinese inns, occasionally a Chinese home, but more often in Chinese temples, where I found I was always welcome. In all the many days that I have spent in the interior of China I have never met with anything but kindness and generosity, even though I belonged to a race that was not popular at that time.

The months I spent with Mr. Brockman and the many trips I made

into the interior gradually removed most of the prejudices and foolish ideas I had about China and the Chinese people that I carried with me on my first visit to that country.

As my prejudices against the Chinese people decreased, my desire to live the rest of my life in Peking increased. Soon after my return to China, on my second visit, I found the house I wanted through the kindness of Mr. W. H. Donald, that well-known adviser to the Chinese Government for more than forty years. I bought it almost at sight just a little more than thirty-five years ago.

It was not until some time later that Mr. Donald and I realized that we had bought the residence of one of the officials of the late Ch'ing government. Like all Chinese homes it is a group of buildings, the principal buildings forming the sides of a number of courts. It is a fairly old building, in pure Chinese architecture of the style of about the time of Emperor Tao Kuang (1782-1850). It is located within the red wall of the Imperial City, a stone's throw from the Forbidden City, a section of Peking that was formerly restricted to officials and attendants of the court.

All my neighbors, except one who was a eunuch, were Manchus, and most of them, including the eunuch, later became my friends. The eunuch's wife was one of the most beautiful and, curiously, one of the most popular women in our neighborhood. My servants were all Manchus, some of them from the palaces of the Manchu families who had had to curtail their establishments after the death of Empress Tz'u Hsi.

I am an architect. My work in Peking at that time was the designing and the supervising of the construction of the buildings of the Union Medical College for the Rockefeller Foundation. This brought me in early contact with the three Manchu princes from whom the land for the buildings was purchased. I was able to do a few favors for these princes which they considered of much greater value than they were. They became my friends, especially Princess Yu, the head of one of the most important of the Manchu clans and owner of the Yu Wang Fu. We razed the buildings forming this palace and used the land for the principal buildings of the present Medical College, destroying such beautiful buildings that it might almost be called vandalism. Princess Yu became my adviser and almost my guardian on all things Chinese until her death many years later.

These Manchus introduced me to other Manchu families. Through them I met Emperor P'u Yi and attended some of the functions connected with his wedding, when he married two beautiful Manchu girls at the same time. His brother and his wife, both artists, came often to my home, usually with presents of some of their best paintings.

When these Manchus noticed my interest in the life of Empress Tz'u Hsi and the Ch'ing emperors they arranged for me to visit at various times the palaces in the Forbidden City, the Imperial City, and the Summer Palace area. They showed me Empress Tz'u Hsi's jewels, including the famous necklace of one hundred and eight perfect pearls, so large that I hesitate to describe them. I saw her paintings, her clothes, and her rooms as they were when she lived in them; also her musical instruments, including a fine porcelain flute that she often played to entertain herself and her friends.

As I saw how this great empress lived and the simple things she enjoyed, and listened to the stories of her kindness and her generosity, to her little vanities and love of beautiful clothes, told by people who had known her intimately, she gradually became a warm, interesting human being, instead of the hard, cruel, and scheming ruler that had so often been described to me.

I was also greatly interested when they showed me the palaces of the imperial princes and their earlier emperors. While the palaces of these emperors and princes were usually of enormous size and elegance, the large buildings were used only for entertainment purposes; the princes and their families actually lived in smaller quarters, often not much larger than those of the middle-class merchants. Of particular interest was the Round Palace, where Kublai Khan gave such wild parties for his fierce Mongol warrior chiefs and entertained Marco Polo more than two hundred years before America was discovered. Much more beautiful was the little palace, the mosque and famous bathroom that the scholarly Emperor Chien Lung built in a vain attempt to please and win the affections of famous Fragrant Princess. I was also shown the island palace of Emperor Kuang Hsu and the prison palace of his adored Pearl Concubine. I often sat for hours in the Pearl Concubine's favorite seat, under the flowering crabapple tree in her private courtyard, writing

many of the notes for this story and dreaming of the great events that had taken place in that group of buildings.

As I completed my commissions for the Americans and British I found myself doing more things for the Chinese. My position on the Commission of Inquiry of the League of Nations as a member of the Chinese delegation made it necessary for me to attend many of the meetings of the League in Geneva. On these visits to Europe and America I undoubtedly bored my friends many times with my too-frequent stories of the Chinese, the Manchus, and the Empress Tz'u Hsi. Probably to stop this annoyance, a number of my friends suggested that I put my stories in a book so they could all read them.

When I mentioned this suggestion to my Manchu friends they also urged me to do this, fortunately for my vanity for an entirely different reason. They wanted someone who was not too prejudiced against them to tell the world of the life and achievements of their Empress. They were particularly proud of the many times she had outwitted the cleverest foreign diplomats that were sent to China by the Western powers. They offered to give me access to their private papers, their diaries, their libraries, and their personal assistance in collecting the necessary material to add to the notes I had been making since my arrival in China.

We started on our search into the life of Empress Tz'u Hsi. Unfortunately we were stopped by the Japanese invasion of North China. Later, the attack on Pearl Harbor and World War II made it necessary for me to leave China for a number of years.

On my return to China at the close of the war I found the Manchus were even more eager that I continue this work. We started immediately to gather together the organization we now knew would be necessary to secure all the information we required. In this we were given every possible assistance by the director, the chief librarian, and the staff of the National Library. They helped us select the members of our staff; they gave us access at all times to their priceless collection of Chinese, Manchu, and Mongol manuscripts and books. The libraries of the several universities and the language school were also open at all times to our research men.

Our staff was divided, or it divided itself, into two sections. One section, under the leadership of a noted Chinese scholar who had spent most of his life in the libraries of China, searched the

libraries and books in private collections for every scrap of information that could be found relating to the life of the Empress Tz'u Hsi. He and his men also spent considerable time in interviewing Chinese professors of history and other Chinese who were formerly connected with the Chinese Government.

The other section, under the direction of an old Manchu scholar, searched the government records and interviewed members of the old Manchu families. The old Manchu could do this, as he was related in some way to most of them. He was a member of one of the oldest and most important Manchu families, but he hid his identity under a Chinese name. It was not until almost the last day I spent in Peking that he told me his real name and connections and then only when he realized that I had guessed his family and clan. I will keep his secret, not because he has anything in his life or family that he is ashamed of, but the feeling is still strong in some places against the old ruling families of the Manchus and, as he said, he has to earn a living for himself and family.

As one of our problems was to locate the records we required from the scattered files of the old Manchu Government, we were fortunate in having this Manchu gentleman helping us. He and his boyhood friend had spent most of their lives in the Department of Records of the old Imperial Government. As they were both students with little else to do, they had read most of the important records and had made copies of some of the more interesting ones.

The Forbidden City and the government departments had been looted three times during the past fifty years. The government of the new Republic of China had put little value on the old records. Many of these records have been used for fuel; the remaining records are rapidly disappearing. But even in such confusion, if given twenty-four hours' notice, these two old men could usually dig out almost anything we required. If they could not find it, it just did not exist. Even for an Oriental that old man had a remarkable memory. He apparently knew the exact location of every manuscript or book in any of the many public or private libraries in Peking.

Next to his memory his most distinguished characteristic was his insistence on the accuracy of every piece of information that we collected and used which related in any way to Empress Tz'u Hsi. He was our watchdog. All the other members of our staff, including

myself, stood in awe of him. Some of the men claimed that he could smell a lie or inaccurate statement. Given one night—he never seemed to require sleep—he could prove the accuracy or inaccuracy of any statement submitted to him. He spoiled many a good story for us by proving it was not true, and at such times he never budged an inch. He was so stubborn that I often wanted to put him out of the office and never see him again. But more often I was worried by the fear that he might get sick, might leave us, or even die before our work was completed. I knew, we all knew, that it would have been almost impossible to complete our work without him.

Unfortunately in our investigations we unearthed a number of incidents in the private life of Empress Tz'u Hsi that we, and especially the Manchus, wished we did not have to tell the world. At times our great woman showed some of the disastrous weaknesses of her sex combined with the impersonality of a dictator. After days of discussion (the Manchus never settle anything in a hurry) they agreed that if we were to give a true picture of her life we would have to include all such incidents in our story. This was because they realized that for a superwoman who had crowded everything fine and feminine out of her life to do the great things she did would be but natural, but for a small woman, possessing all the charms and frailties of an attractive woman, which she was, to do such things would be extraordinary.

We must mention one more old man who was of great assistance to us. He was a hermit scholar, a Chinese, who had given his entire life to the study of the lives of the late Ch'ing emperors, including Empress Tz'u Hsi. He lived fifteen or more miles west of Peking and was far too old ever to leave his chair again, but he was always willing to receive our men and to help us with additional information or with his criticisms on any subject or story that we presented to him.

Naturally we ran into many difficulties in our work. We soon found that the first thing Empress Tz'u Hsi did when she secured power was to attempt to destroy every record of her early life of poverty and the fact that her father had died in prison for a serious crime against the government. While these facts were known to a number of Manchus she made it very unpopular or risky for anyone to discuss them in public or even privately. The result was to open

the gates for a deluge of rumors and falsehoods that were far more damaging to her reputation than the actual facts would have been. But they made our task more difficult, as we had to collect and carefully study every story of this nature, and there were many such stories. We did not want to miss any grain of truth they might possess, or did we want to be later accused of omitting such stories because we did not know they existed.

Let us look at one or two typical stories of this nature that are often repeated in Peking and have found their way into a number of foreign books. A good friend of mine, a high official and a fine Chinese scholar, spent considerable time in securing and bringing to me what he considered was proof that Empress Tz'u Hsi had been the mistress of a wealthy Chinese before she entered the palace as an imperial concubine.

We showed my friend that we knew all about this "rich Chinese"; that his name was Wu Chin-t'ang and that he had been of considerable assistance to Empress Tz'u Hsi when she was preparing to enter the palace, but in doing this he was repaying a debt he owed her grandfather. We were able to throw considerable doubt on the truthfulness of this story when we showed my friend that Wu Chin-t'ang was more than eighty years old when he first met Empress Tz'u Hsi, that he was not a rich man but a very poor man, and that he had raised the money he gave Tz'u Hsi's mother from friends and relatives, who hoped to reap a profit from their loans when the young girl became an imperial concubine. We also showed my friend the many and the exceedingly intimate nature of the examinations and a list of the names of the people who made them before the young girl was accepted even as a candidate for entrance to the palace. My friend then expressed his conviction that someone had misled him.

Another friend brought to our office what he thought was proof that Empress Tz'u Hsi was neither a Manchu nor a Chinese but was of foreign blood, born in one of the Russo-Siberian tribes in Siberia, and so was Russian. This story so enraged our Manchu that it took the entire office force several hours to calm him sufficiently even to answer such an insult to the Empress and the Manchu race. But when he was able to talk he so buried my friend with the government records of her father's and mother's family and

the place of birth of Empress Tz'u Hsi that my friend decided the information he had collected must have been about some other empress.

Probably there is no question about the Empress Tz'u Hsi that has been more often discussed and on which there is so much inaccurate information as the place of her birth. Even her own nephews confessed to me that they did not know where she was born. Chinese writers have attributed to her a variety of birthplaces. Most foreigners will tell you that she was born in a hutung they call Pewter Lane. While it is true that her mother did live for a time in Pewter Lane, it was nearly forty years after the birth of her famous daughter, and after her two sons had become dukes and wealthy enough to purchase a fine home for their mother. These same people will usually tell you that the Empress was born in extreme poverty, practically a slave girl of the slums, evidently overlooking the fact that in China, as in other countries, slum girls are born in the slums, and not on Park Avenue.

But we were not entirely unsympathetic with these writers in their effort to locate the birthplace of the Empress after the difficulty we ourselves experienced in deciding this important question. Even though we knew every home her father and mother had lived in from the time of their marriage until their deaths, our group came near to breaking up trying to decide the birthplace of Empress Tz'u Hsi. Unfortunately for us, the family moved from Chiao Kao Kow to the less desirable Tz Ssu Tiao just three months before the birth of the Empress. The Manchus, keeping true to tradition, claimed she was born in the home on Chiao Kao Kow where she was conceived. They proved this by many references to their old writings; they even had the opinion of the mother of the Empress to support their claim. The Chinese, with more noise but less authority, claimed the birthplace of a child was where it was "caught," or, as we would say, first saw the light of day. When the argument had lasted most of the day and showed every evidence of lasting most of the night, I suggested the compromise of including both places, giving the reason for doing so, and letting the reader decide for himself where she was born.

While Empress Tz'u Hsi was able to destroy many of the early records of her family and enforce a strict taboo on any discussions

of her place of birth and early life as long as she was alive she could not stop her family and others from talking after her death. Nor could she entirely stop her old mother, during her lifetime, from bragging a little on certain occasions about the many hardships she and her daughter passed through before her daughter became a great woman. A not-over-brilliant brother could also be induced to talk at times when he thought he was with discreet friends. Many of the Manchus wrote in the secrecy of their diaries a number of things about the Empress they dared not mention in public. Most of these diaries are now in the possession of their children, and were read by our old Manchu or his assistants.

But the most reliable information about the early life of the Empress came from government records, which were so numerous and so often duplicated that even the power of an Empress could not destroy all of them. The Manchu Government of China was apparently greatly overstaffed during the reign of the later Ch'ing emperors, owing to the fact that every male Manchu was either in the army or in the government. Families of influence in China, as in many other countries today, often secured safe positions in the government for their sons instead of the more dangerous and disagreeable positions in the army, which were liable to take them to the wars on one of the distant frontiers of China.

In order to keep this large number of office holders employed, very complete records were kept of every transaction connected with the government, especially of the funds handled by the Treasury Department. As every Manchu drew a pension from the government a record was kept of his birth, name, place of residence, position held, salary received, and any change in his place of residence. As the father of the Empress was an officer in the army from the time of his marriage until his death in prison in Nanking we had little difficulty in following him and his family in their many changes in residence.

The Department of Justice and the Board of Punishments also kept a complete record of every person accused or convicted of a crime. Unfortunately we also found considerable material about the father of the Empress in the records of these government departments. The date and place of birth of every Manchu girl were also carefully recorded, as every Manchu girl was subject to call for

service in the imperial court or as a candidate for imperial concubine. Although Empress Tz'u Hsi was able to destroy all evidence in this department of her own birth, we could trace the birth of the other members of her family.

We met with some unusual characters and had a number of interesting experiences when interviewing the members of the old Manchu families. An outstanding characteristic of all Manchus is their good nature. But even our old Manchu became annoyed when, after days of searching in the far northeastern corner of the city, he found the man he was looking for was the peanut seller just two blocks from our office. This old man, the sole owner and entire staff of a peanut shop that measured less than four feet square, was the direct descendant of emperors. He was born a prince and brought up in one of the imperial palaces and, but for a peculiar turn of the wheel of fortune, might have been an emperor—a worried, unhappy emperor, instead of the best-natured, most happy, and best-liked man on the entire street.

Neither space nor the patience of the reader will permit me to tell more of the interesting people who passed through our office. But I cannot resist telling of one more odd character who added considerably to our fund of information on the court of Empress Tz'u Hsi.

This man was the grandson of one of the best-known eunuchs of Empress Tz'u Hsi's court. While some might doubt that eunuchs ever had grandsons, a few of them did. There are records of eunuchs who took the precaution of having a son before becoming a eunuch in order to have someone to carry on the name and to look after the family graves. The more common and more popular custom was for a eunuch, if and when he became wealthy, to adopt a son, usually the son of one of his brothers.

The father of this particular Manchu was the adopted son of one of the most powerful and most hated officials of the later Ch'ing Dynasty. Many of the accusations against this eunuch are now believed to have been greatly exaggerated, but his name is still prominently connected with the worst scandals of Empress Tz'u Hsi's reign. Many now believe that his greatest fault was such an intense loyalty to his mistress that he believed any crime was justifiable if it were in her interest.