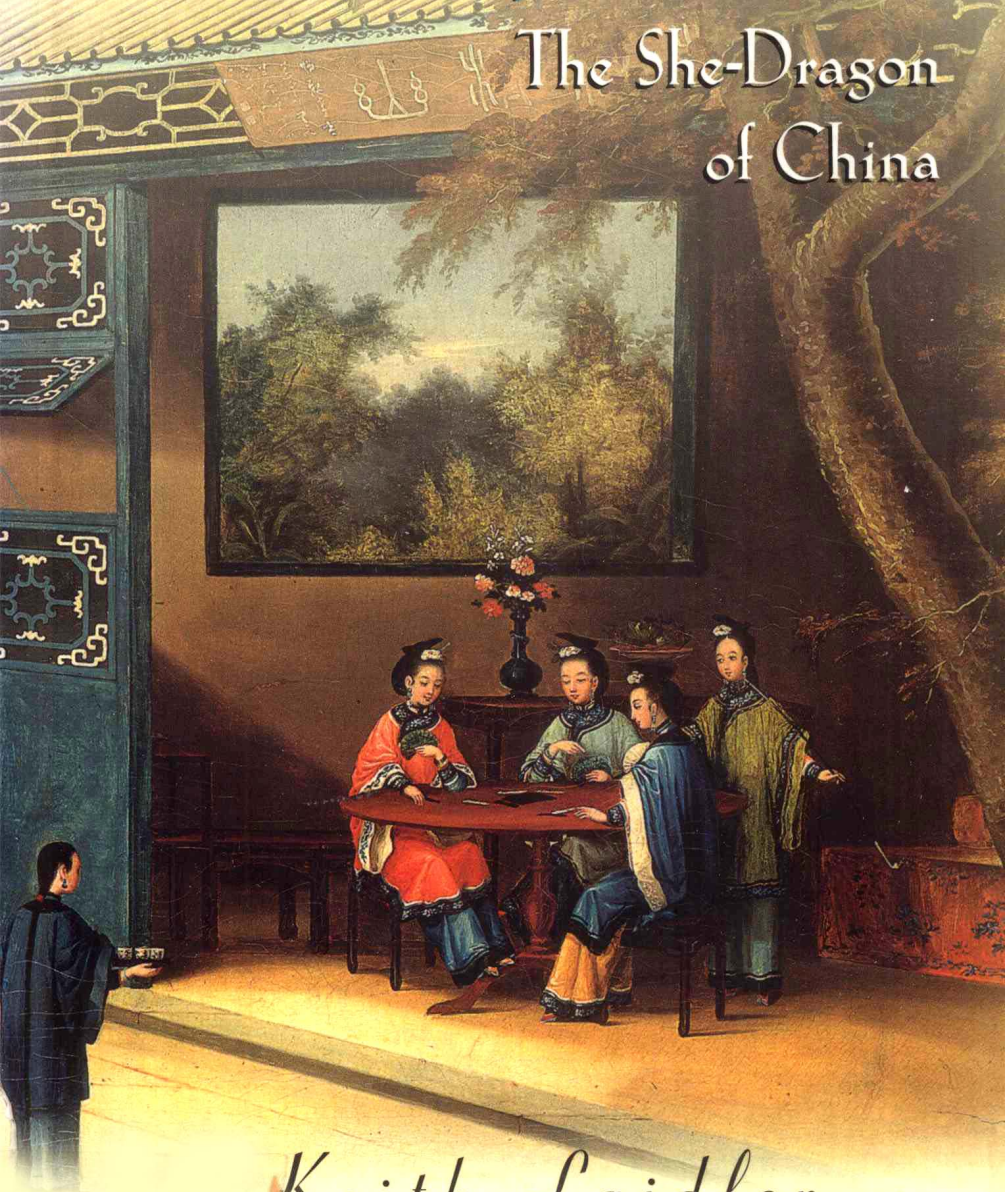


# *The Last* **Empress**

*The She-Dragon  
of China*



*Keith Laidler*

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Published in the UK in 2003 by John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate,  
Chichester, West Sussex PO19 8SQ, England

Telephone (+44) 1243 779777

Email (for orders and customer service enquiries): [cs-books@wiley.co.uk](mailto:cs-books@wiley.co.uk)

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Reprinted March 2003

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Wiley-VCH Verlag GmbH, Boschstr. 12, D-69469 Weinheim, Germany

John Wiley & Sons Australia Ltd, 33 Park Road, Milton, Queensland 4064, Australia

John Wiley & Sons (Asia) Pte Ltd, 2 Clementi Loop #02-01, Jin Xing Distripark, Singapore 129809

John Wiley & Sons Canada Ltd, 22 Worcester Road, Etobicoke, Ontario, Canada M9W 1L1

### ***British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data***

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-470-84880-4

Typeset in 11/13pt Photina by Mathematical Composition Setters Ltd, Salisbury, Wiltshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

This book is printed on acid-free paper responsibly manufactured from sustainable forestry in which at least two trees are planted for each one used for paper production.

## *Author's note*

*I*n the early 1980s I had the good fortune to be the first documentary film-maker invited to visit the People's Republic of China to research a television series on the wildlife of China. In the course of six weeks' intensive travel I journeyed across the length and breadth of that vast nation, from Tibet to Shanghai and from the snowy wastes of Manchuria to the southern rainforests of Yunnan.

This journey led to several programmes on China's wild places, to a lifelong fascination with Chinese history, and a continuing engagement with the Middle Kingdom that has lasted, in a series of yearly visits, up to the present. Much has changed since that time: China today is, in parts at least, a very modern country, one of a fortunate few with a strongly expanding economy, this century's coming superpower. But twenty years ago it was still the land of a million bicycles, of 'fashion' that offered a choice between grey or blue Mao suits (three sizes), of shrill loudspeakers on every street corner and in every railway carriage, stridently exhorting the masses to follow Maoist thought and the edicts of the Party. It was most definitely a 'less developed country' – still reeling from the Great Leap Forward (or as some of my more forthright Chinese friends delighted in naming it, the 'Great Leap Backward'). And 'backward' would be a more apposite term for the state of the nation at that juncture. I spent time in remote villages and towns – off-limits to other Westerners – that reminded me irresistibly of Medieval Europe: unpaved roads that turned instantly to mud at the first downpour; non-existent sanitation, with rubbish and ordure piled up in the streets; gangs of navvies man-hauling huge logs on flimsy barrows, their faces blank with exhaustion; hawkers, tinkers, shoemakers all noisily calling out their wares; street dentists extracting reluctant molars from groaning patients; and over and through it all a



swirling, seething mass of humanity, numbers past counting, all hell-bent on their own personal goals but stopping briefly to gawp at the *Da Bizi*, the first Western 'big nose' they had seen in the flesh.

After four weeks of continuous travel and alien meals of snake, dog and camel-web, my companion and fellow filmmaker, Mike Rosenburg, had had enough and flew back to the UK. The last two weeks were one of the hardest and yet most rewarding periods of my life. I was totally immersed in things Chinese, a lone Westerner in a deeply alien culture. But being alone forced me to look at this, to me, strange society with new eyes. Whereas China today has assimilated much of Western culture and mind-set, in those days, despite its veneer of Communist thought, it was still very much a Confucian society, its behaviour tied to the self-same traditions that have governed Chinese life for millennia. I was there to make wildlife programmes, but I learned much more about China than its zoology. I found that I got on very well with my Chinese hosts, they opened up to me and showed me aspects of themselves and their culture that, I believe, have helped me to understand and explain the seemingly irrational happenings in the lifetime of the Last Empress. In addition, my dealings with officials gave me insights into the sometimes Alice-in-Wonderland world of Chinese bureaucracy. There was in China (and to a lesser extent there still is) a general proclivity among officialdom for denying the obvious, for flying in the face of common sense and, with apparent conviction and sincerity, brazenly naming black 'white'. This was brought home to me most strongly in an interview with a Chinese forestry official in Sichuan. Outside the office trucks passed noisily down the track at a rate of one or two a minute, packed to the gunwales with huge tree trunks, cut from the forests near the Tibetan border and destined for some construction site in the provincial capital, Chengdu. Their passage shook the thin walls of the small office we sat in.

'Where exactly do these lorries deposit their timber?' I asked.

The official stared back, his eyes puzzled, 'What lorries?'



It became obvious later in the interview that Party policy said no timber should be cut from this region. Therefore, for the official, the lorries simply could not exist. Everyone knew the problem was not to be discussed, so everyone pretended it was not there. That way, in a typically Chinese solution, the business could go ahead, Chengdu could get its timber, and at the same time Party policy was adhered to – because nothing was happening! To me it seemed like madness.

At the end of a heated discussion I was given a very important piece of advice, a key of sorts to understanding much of the Middle Kingdom's history. 'You must understand,' the official told me earnestly, and with every indication of sincerity, 'facts are different in China.'

To my many Chinese friends, for a multitude of privileged moments in the Middle Kingdom

## *Acknowledgements*

The content and conclusions of this book on Yehonala are solely my own responsibility, as are any unconscious errors that may exist. But the work could never have been written without help and advice from numerous sources. Many Chinese friends provided information for the work, and opened up aspects of Chinese history that have thrown new light on the turbulent times Yehonala lived through; especial thanks are due to Mr Shen Zhihua for his zeal and commitment to unearthing information within China. In the United Kingdom, the staff of Durham University Library have been tireless in helping me obtain obscure books and manuscripts. At home, my wife Liz, and my children Rachel and Jamie, have endured my deadlines, and my doubts and conflicts in dealing with the enormously complicated events that compose the life of the Last Empress. Their enthusiasm and understanding have been an invaluable support. My editor, Sally Smith, guided me in numerous ways; her persistence and patience have added immeasurably to the style and content of these pages.



## *Cast of major characters*

Pinyin romanisation of the Chinese names is given in parenthesis after each entry.

1. A-lu-te (A-lu-de) – Empress of Tung Chih Emperor. Possibly murdered on Yehonala's orders after the death of Tung Chih.
2. An Te-hai (An Dehai) – Grand Eunuch during early part of Yehonala's rule. Executed after breaking house-laws and (by Yehonala's command) leaving the Forbidden City to travel to Shandong Province.
3. Bruce, Frederick – Lord Elgin's (q.v.) younger brother, first British minister to China.
4. Burgevine, Henry – American mercenary, second-in-command of Ever-Victorious Army fighting for Imperials against the Tai Ping rebels. Later absconded to Tai Ping.
5. Cheng (Zheng) – Prince, Imperial family. After the Hsien Feng Emperor's death he conspired with Su Shun and Prince I to assassinate Yehonala and Sakota and to become regents for the infant Tung Chih, Yehonala's son by the Emperor. Sentenced to hang himself.
6. Chi Ying (Qi Ying) – Chinese mandarin, forced to commit suicide after failing to halt advance of Franco-British forces, 1860.
7. Ch'ien-lung (Qianlong) – Emperor of China. Considered one of the most successful and prestigious of China's rulers (1711 – 1796).
8. Ch'un (Chun) – Prince. A son of the Tao Kwang Emperor. He married one of Yehonala's sisters, by whom he had a son who became the reformist Kuang Hsu Emperor, whom Yehonala later imprisoned, and may have ordered poisoned.
9. Dorgun (Dorgon) – Manchu regent; oversaw the final victory of the Manchu over the Ming Dynasty in 1644.

## CAST OF MAJOR CHARACTERS



10. Elgin, Lord – envoy of British government during Franco-British embassy to Peking (1860). Ordered the burning of the Summer Palace as reprisal against the Chinese torture and murder of allied prisoners.
11. Favier – Roman Catholic Bishop of Beijing. One of the first foreigners to warn that the Boxers intended a massacre of all foreigners.
12. Gaselee – British general, relieved siege of the foreign legation at Beijing 14th August 1900.
13. Gordon, Charles George – British army officer seconded to fight against Tai Ping rebels as leader of Ever-Victorious Army after F. T. Ward's (q.v.) death. Later famously killed in Khartoum by followers of the Mahdi.
14. Gros – Baron, envoy of French government during Franco-British embassy to Beijing (1860).
15. Hart, Sir Robert – head of Chinese Customs Service, a sinophile who lived in China for over fifty years and survived the siege of the foreign legations.
16. Hsien Feng (Xianfeng) – Emperor of China. Raised Yehonala from concubine, third rank, to position of power in the Forbidden City, following the birth of their son, the Tung Chih Emperor.
17. Hung Hsiu-chuan (Hong Xiuquan) – failed scholar and visionary, who believed himself the younger brother of Jesus and, in 1851, raised the standard of revolt against the Qing Dynasty as undisputed leader of Tai Ping rebellion.
18. I (Yi) – Prince of the Imperial clan. Negotiator (along with Mu Yin (q.v.)) during Franco-British embassy 1860. With Su Shun and Prince Cheng he attempted to eliminate Yehonala and seize power after Emperor Hsien Feng's death. Sentenced to hang himself by Yehonala.
19. James, Hubert – professor, beheaded by Boxers during the siege of the legations, and head exhibited in a cage over the Dong'an Gate.
20. Jung Lu (Ronglu) – sometime Head of Chinese Army, probable fiancé of Yehonala before she was taken as the Emperor's concubine to the Forbidden City; her alleged lover thereafter.



21. K'ang Hsi (Kangxi) – Emperor of China, 1662–1722.
22. Kang I (Kang Yi) – Yehonala's 'Lord High Extortioner' and conservative anti-reform minister, made a Boxer general by the Empress Dowager's command.
23. Kang Yu-wei (Kang Youwei) – leading light of reform movement; responsible for the content of much of the Kuang Hsu Emperor's 'One Hundred Days' reform.
24. Ketteler, von – German baron, murdered by Chinese at beginning of Boxer rebellion and the siege of the legations.
25. Kuang Hsu (Guangxu) – Emperor of China 1875–1908. Son of Prince Chun and Yehonala's sister. After the failure of his 1898 'One Hundred Days' reform attempt, he was held prisoner in the Forbidden City on Yehonala's orders. Poisoned by persons unknown, possibly Li Lien-ying (q.v.), Yuan Shi-kai (q.v.), or Yehonala.
26. Kung (Gong) – Prince, brother of the Hsien Feng Emperor, negotiated the Convention of Beijing with British and French, 1860. Later acted as chief adviser to Yehonala until he fell from favour.
27. Li Hsiu-cheng (Li Xiucheng) – Tai Ping rebel commander. Known as Chung Wang, or Loyal Prince. Captured after the fall of Nanking (1864). Wrote a history of the revolt before being beheaded.
28. Li Hung-chang (Li Hongzhang) – Chinese minister and sometime Viceroy of Chihli Province. Served with distinction in the Tai Ping rebellion, and proved invaluable as a negotiator with the French, Russian, British and Japanese powers. Perhaps the most intelligent and far-seeing of all Yehonala's advisers.
29. Li Lien-ying (Li Lianying) – Grand Eunuch in the Forbidden City following An Te-hai's untimely demise. Became chief confidant of Yehonala during the final decades of her rule.
30. Li Ping-heng (Li Pingheng) – Chinese pro-Boxer commander. Committed suicide after series of reverses against Western and Japanese troops, 1900.
31. Li Tzu-cheng (Li Zicheng) – leader of rebellion which toppled the Ming; declared himself Emperor of China, but was soon afterwards crushed by the Manchu.

## CAST OF MAJOR CHARACTERS



32. Loch, Henry – secretary to Lord Elgin, captured and tortured by Chinese in 1860.
33. Lung Yu (Long You) – Empress of Kuang Hsu Emperor. Reputedly spied on the Emperor for Yehonala.
34. McDonald, Sir Claude – British Minister in Beijing during siege of legations.
35. Morrison, George – *The Times* correspondent during siege of legations and well into the twentieth century.
36. Mu Yin (Muyin) – President of the Board of War, chief negotiator (with Prince I) for Chinese during pre-conflict phase of Franco-British embassy, 1860.
37. Muyanga (Muyanga) – Uncle of Yehonala, who cared for her after her father's death.
38. Nurhachi – Manchu ruler, founder of Qing Dynasty which ruled China from 1644 until 1912.
39. Parkes, Harry – British Consul in Canton, acted as interpreter during Lord Elgin's Franco-British embassy to China, 1860; captured and tortured by the Chinese.
40. Pearl Concubine – concubine of Kuang Hsu, murdered on orders of Yehonala during flight from allied forces 1900.
41. Pichon, Stephen – French Minister to Beijing at the time of the siege of the foreign legations, 1900.
42. Pu Yi (Puyi) – son of Prince Chun the Younger and Jung Lu's daughter; chosen by Yehonala to succeed the Kuang Hsu Emperor. He was to be the last Emperor of the Manchu Dynasty.
43. P'un Chun (Punchun) – son of Prince Chun, appointed Heir Apparent to Kuang Hsu Emperor. Later fell into disfavour and was demoted by Yehonala to commoner status.
44. Sakota – Empress of Hsien Feng Emperor, known also as Nihuru, and Empress of the Eastern Palace. Ruled as co-Regent with Yehonala until her death in 1880 (reputedly poisoned on Yehonala's orders).
45. Seng Guo Lin Sen – Mongol Commander of Chinese Army which defended Beijing during the Franco-British embassy in 1860.



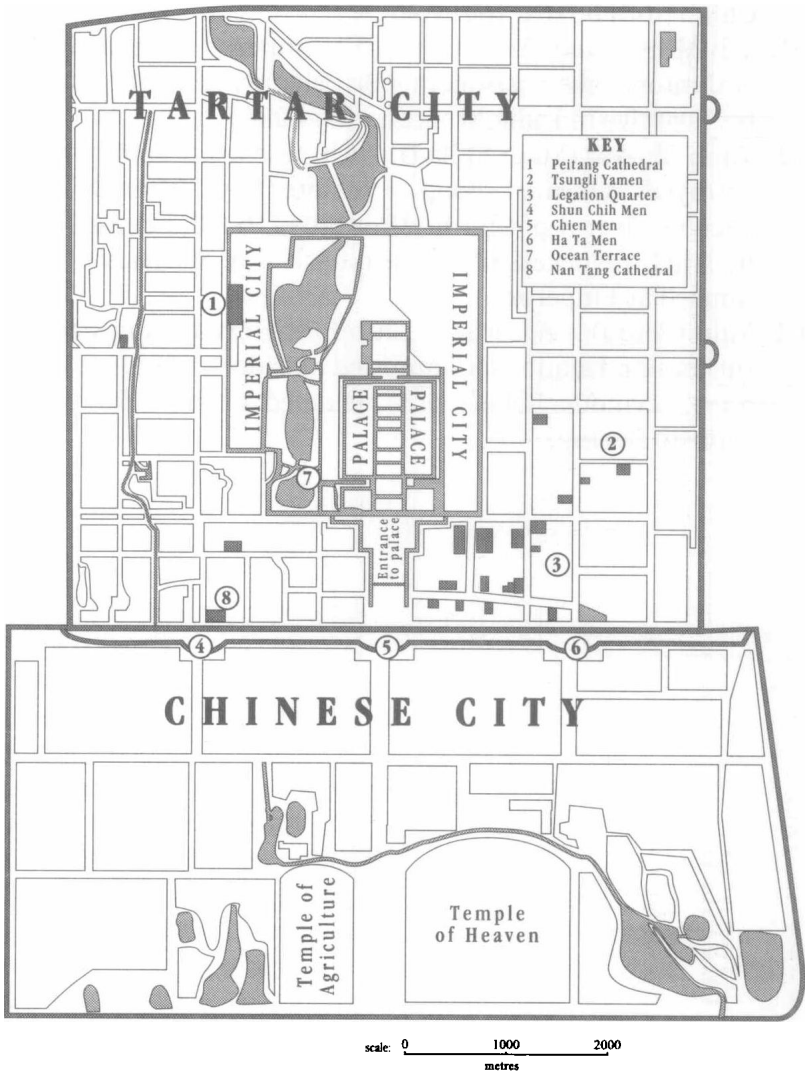
46. Seymour, Sir Edward – Admiral, Royal Navy. Commander of relief force charged with lifting the siege of the legations in Beijing.
47. Su Shun (Sushun) – Chinese Minister, renowned for his corruption and vast fortune. Conspired against Yehonala after death of the Hsien Feng Emperor. Beheaded on Yehonala's orders.
48. Sugiyama – Japanese Chancellor, Beijing. Murdered by pro-Boxer Muslim troops at the beginning of the siege of the foreign legations, 1900.
49. Tan Ssu-t'ung (Tan Sitong) – reformist scholar, executed for planning coup against Yehonala and her conservative allies.
50. Tao Kwang (Daoguang) – Emperor of China 1821 – 1850, attempted unsuccessfully to suppress the opium trade.
51. Tseng Guo-feng (Zeng Guofan) – Chinese general who gained renown fighting against the Tai Ping rebels.
52. Tuan – Prince of the Imperial clan, noted pro-Boxer sympathiser. His son, P'un Chun, was first made Heir Apparent, then demoted to commoner status.
53. Teng Fu-hsiang (Dong Fuxiang) – Muslim rebel turned Chinese general. Prominent in the siege of the foreign legations, 1900.
54. Tung Chi (Tongzhi) – Emperor of China, 1861 – 1875. Son of Yehonala, died of complications following smallpox; infection possibly orchestrated on Yehonala's orders.
55. Wade, Thomas – interpreter, Lord Elgin's Franco-British embassy to China, 1860.
56. Ward, Frederick Townsend – American mercenary, founder of the Ever-Victorious Army, killed fighting against the Tai Ping rebels in 1862.
57. Ward, J. E. – American envoy to China, 1859. Regarded as 'tribute bearer' by the Chinese.
58. Weng Tung-ho (Weng Tonghe) – tutor to Tung Chih and Kuang Hsu Emperors, Grand Councillor, supported reform movement and was cashiered by Yehonala after her 1898 'coup'.

## CAST OF MAJOR CHARACTERS



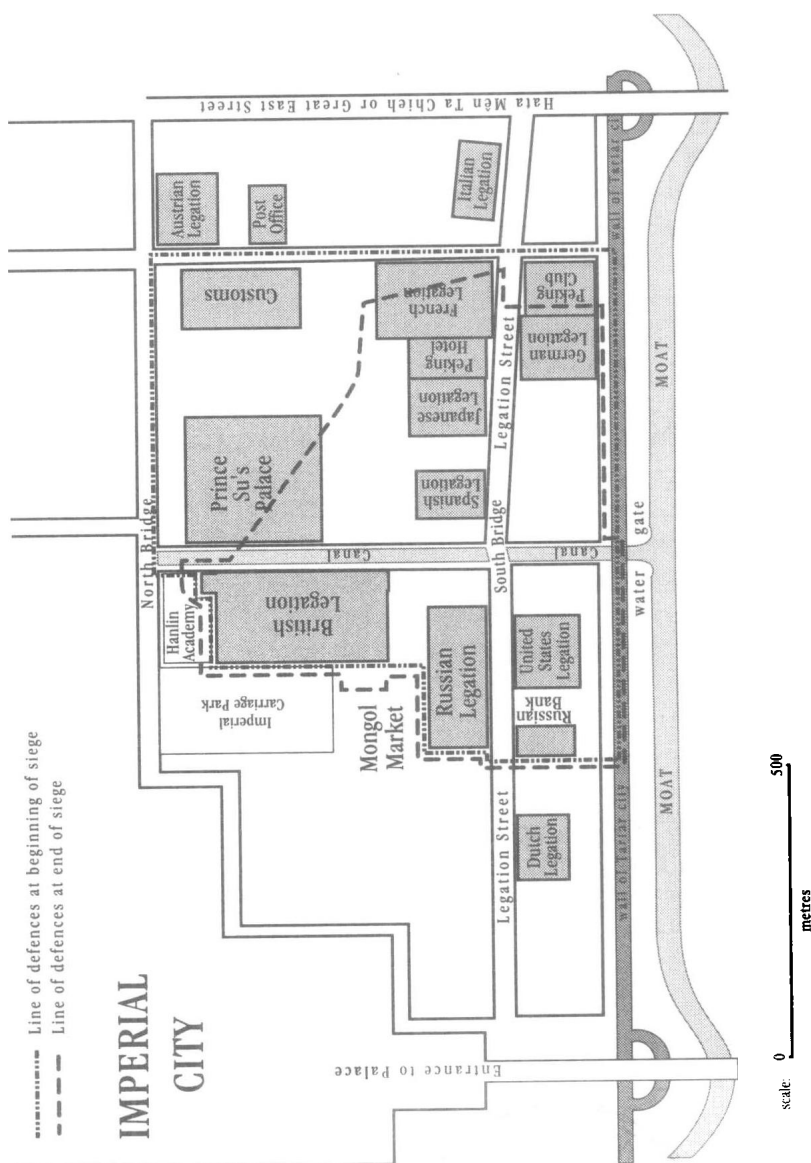
59. Wu K'o-tu (Wu Ketu) – Censor, committed suicide at Tung Chih Emperor's tomb in 1879 in protest at Yehonala's flouting of tradition.
60. Wu San-kuei (Wu Sangui) – Ming general who turned his coat and fought for the Manchu invaders against the Ming Dynasty. Later a satrap of the Manchu in south-western China until he rose in revolt.
61. Yeh Ming-Ch'en (Ye Mingchen) – Imperial Commissioner at Canton. Taken prisoner by British during the *Arrow* war, held captive in India, where he later died.
62. Yuan Shi-kai (Yuan Shikai) – Chinese army commander, betrayed reformist coup. Promoted by Yehonala and became Viceroy of Chihli. After fall of the Manchu in 1912 he tried unsuccessfully to establish a new dynasty with himself as Emperor.
63. Yulu (Youlu) – Viceroy of Chihli Province during siege of the foreign legations. Committed suicide 6th August 1900 after Seymour Relief Force defeated Chinese forces en route to Beijing.

# Maps



Map 1 Beijing, 1900.

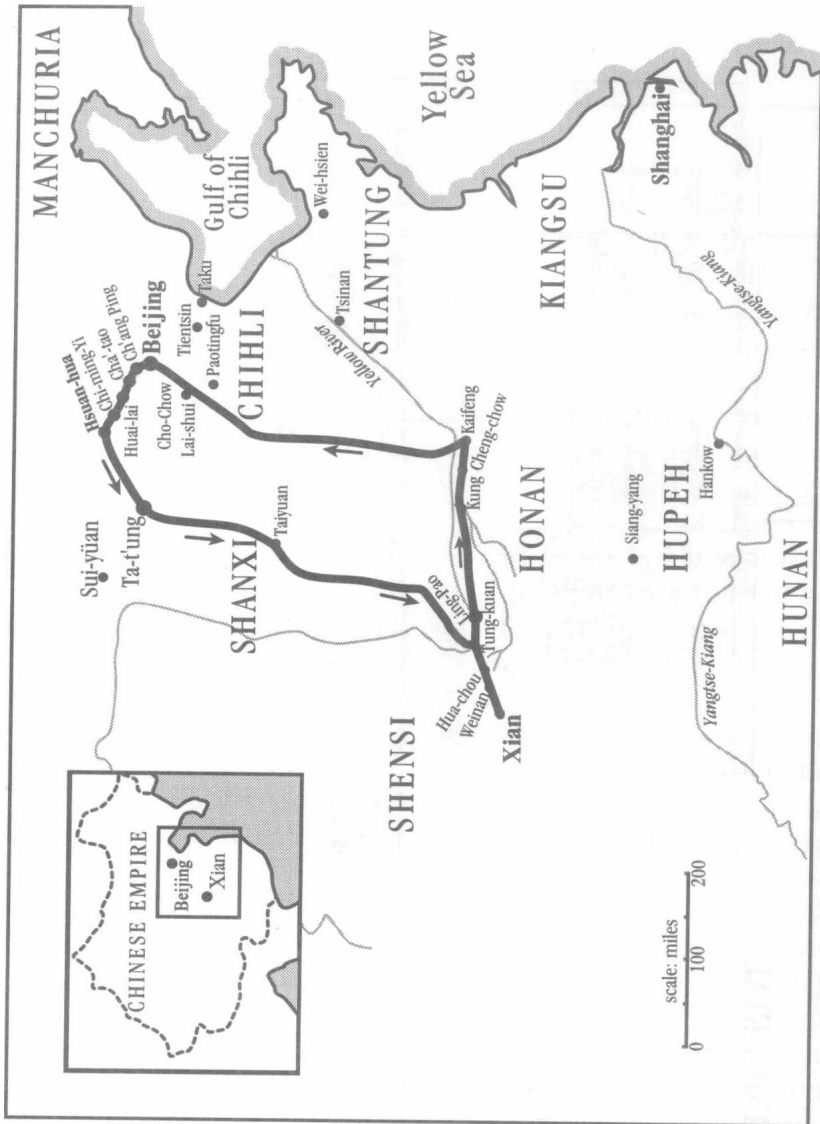
# MAPS



Map 2 Defence of the foreign legations, Beijing, 1900. (See also area 3, Map 1.)



# MAPS



Map 3 The route of the Imperial journey, 1900 - 1901.