

Strong women

A provocative new exhibition at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery reveals the power of imperial women

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A Freer/Sackler exhibit examines the empresses of the Qing Dynasty, who often had more power than the royal men.



In 1905, seven years before the end of China's Qing Dynasty, Alice Roosevelt, the daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, visited Beijing's Forbidden City. She met the ailing Empress Dowager Cixi, who presented her with a black Pekingese dog named Manchu. Ignoring the Confucian maxim that "Women should not take part in public affairs," Cixi had made herself China's de facto ruler, taking control of state affairs and international relations. In the United States, meanwhile, anti-Chinese sentiment was rife, and Roosevelt's highlevel visit could not smooth over the countries' differences over an immigration treaty. Roosevelt went home with Manchu, but China continued its boycott of U.S. products.

Was Cixi's power unusual for a woman in China? Who were the Qing Dynasty's previous powerful empresses? And what, anyway, is an "empress dowager"?

These are among the questions addressed in a superb exhibition at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. There are others, too, such as: What did Qing (pronounced "Ching") empresses look like? What things did they own, wear and use? And what do these things tell us about them, about imperial rule and about China in general?

"Empresses of China's Forbidden City, 1644-1912," the biggest show at the Sackler in a decade, comes to Washington 40 years after the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China. It is the fruit of a collaboration between two American museums and Beijing's Palace Museum, also known as the Forbidden City.

It's a serious undertaking at every level: diplomatic, financial, scholarly and artistic. Almost all of the objects in the show have come from the Palace Museum. They include large-scale portraits, painted screens, silk robes, festive headdresses, hand scrolls, fans, hair ornaments, bracelets, furniture and a heavy Buddhist stupa made from gold and silver.

The stupa, which is adorned with coral, turquoise, lapis lazuli and other semiprecious stones, was commissioned by the Qianlong Emperor in honor of his mother, the Empress Dowager Chongqing, after her death. Inside is a box with a lock of her hair. The Qianlong Emperor, who ruled over one of the largest empires the world had ever seen, micromanaged its creation, continually issuing new instructions, so that it ended up being twice as tall and far more elaborate than the original design.

The object suggests something more than just mourning, more than just "My dear mother, I loved her." It suggests reverence. It suggests power.

The Qing Dynasty lasted 268 years, from 1644 until 1912, when the Empress Dowager Longyu signed abdication papers on behalf of the 5-year-old Xuantong emperor — Puyi, the "Last Emperor."

Two hundred and sixty-eight years is a lot of ground to cover. So the exhibition curators — Jan Stuart of the Freer/Sackler and Daisy Yiyou Wang of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Mass. (where the show opened last summer) — narrowed their focus to five key women.

One of these, the Empress Xiaozhuang, was a wife, mother and grandmother of emperors and an influential political figure during the first years of the Qing Dynasty, which started when a Manchurian clan allied with disparate powers overthrew the Ming Dynasty.

Two others, the Empress Dowager Chongqing and the Empress Xiaoxian, were connected to the Qianlong Emperor (mother and wife, respectively). The final two, Empress Dowager Ci'an and Empress Dowager Cixi, were important figures during the final decades of the Qing Dynasty.

Still, the show is not directly about these women. It is about the objects from the Palace Museum and what they tell us about the roles of empress and empress dowager.

Although Chinese emperors had multiple spouses, known as consorts, each of whom was given one of eight ranks, there was only one empress at a time. Consorts could advance to a higher rank by bearing a son. Each son had an opportunity to become emperor, no matter the rank of his mother, so there was fierce competition among the consorts.

Each emperor's mother had special status as an "empress dowager." (That same title could also be given to the widowed primary wife of the emperor's father.) The empress dowager was ranked above the empress. She was second only to the emperor in the imperial family.

If the idea behind the show is to argue that Chinese women near the top of the royal hierarchy wielded power and influence, it also acknowledges that historical revisionism can go only so far. The first sentence in Wang and Stuart's catalogue introduction is: "By today's standards, the restrictions imposed on empresses in China's last dynasty are shocking." These women, they go on, were the "inalienable possessions of the monarchy," their TOP: "The Qianlong Emperor and Imperial Woman Hunting a Deer," by court painters, probably

at the Wish-Fulfilling Studio, circa 1760-79. ABOVE: “Empress Dowager Chongqing at the Age of Eighty,” (1771) by Ignatius Sichelbarth (Ai Qimeng), Yi Lantai and Wang Ruxue. lives were controlled by stringent codes, and their freedom and opportunities were severely restricted. Their most important job was to produce children — above all, sons. “Yet,” they continue, “if you engage with these women on their own terms, and within their historical context and don’t try to pull them into the present, their experiences prove enlightening as they made meaningful for themselves within — and sometimes beyond — the formal strictures of the court.”

I can see why Wang and Stuart felt the need to say this. But I also wish we could move beyond the kind of moral vanity, failed imagination and forced infantilism that demands this kind of hand-holding. It’s as if the idea of different cultures having different mores, and indeed the existence of history itself — which, let’s face it, is one long litany of injustice — were too much for people to get their heads around.

Never mind. Wang and Stuart have done an exemplary job. Among the most moving things in the show is a poem by the artistically inclined Qianlong Emperor, inscribed in his own hand on precious, 11th-century brown paper. He wrote it months after the death of his wife, soul mate and childhood sweetheart, the Empress Xiaoxian. Heartbroken by the death of her 2-year-old son, Xiaoxian had fallen ill on a trip to eastern China with her husband.

The poem is titled “Expressing My Grief.” It fulfills the promise of its title with poignant aplomb:

There are times when I find a brief respite,
 Yet, before long, my feelings are affected
 And I break down once more. I can well believe that life is a dream,
 And that all things are but empty.

The Qing empire was vast. It excelled at assimilating different cultural traditions, including Western-style pictorial influences. The Qianlong Emperor, in particular, was fond of an attractive hybrid of Western and Chinese picture-making known as “scenic illusion painting.”

A lovely example in the show is a large painting of the emperor’s young, chubby-cheeked son, the future Jiaqing Emperor, waving out at the viewer, while his mother, believed to be the third-rank consort, Ling, stands solicitously beside him. As in Velazquez’s “Las Meninas,” the implied viewer is the child’s father — in this case the emperor himself.

The painting doubles as a view through a window. Trompe l’oeil window frames and tricks of perspective make it seem as if mother and child are in a room between the emperor’s own (where we are) and a scenic exterior replete with bamboo grove, rocks and auspicious peonies. To reinforce the illusion and the dollhouse effect, the entire top half of the painting is given over to an empty room upstairs.

Among the show’s most lustrous items are festive robes, or “jifu,” worn by Qing empresses. A traditional duty of empresses was to oversee the production of silk, so these astonishing robes, made from patterned silk satin and embroidery and decorated with symbolic motifs, were special expressions of their influence. A hierarchy of colors dictated that yellow be used by only the most senior imperial women. Other colors and motifs

were introduced, often in ways that broke with convention and expressed the special predilections of the wearer.

The most ubiquitous symbol in the show is the mythical phoenix. It is painted, embroidered on socks and silk fans, carved into stone seals and depicted in cloisonné screens. Said to alight on paulownia trees “only during times of just and proper rule,” the phoenix was not exclusively associated with women. But it appears so commonly in objects connected with powerful women that, as you walk through the show, phoenix and empress come to feel virtually synonymous.

God knows why, but I happened to have Sinéad O’Connor’s great song “Troy” in my head when I saw the show. The song’s raging, heartbroken mood is at odds with the show’s ambience of exquisite calm. And yet O’Connor’s simple lyric, delivered with utmost drama at the song’s climax, chimed uncannily with the exhibit’s theme of female power suppressed in one sphere yet made manifest in others: “I will rise. And I will return. A phoenix from the flames!” *Empresses of China’s Forbidden City, 1644–1912* Through June 23 at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery. 202–633–1000.