

# China through the years

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China as a country has changed dramatically since its imperial dynasties. During the 1900's China has gone from a monarchy to a republic to a communist nation, split into several pieces owned by warlords, emperors, presidents, Japan and even Russia and eventually came back together as the modern China we know today. Though many of China's millions of people have lived through these years, few have a story as detailed and interesting as Henry Pu Yi, the last emperor of China. His autobiography, "The Last Manchu," has been translated into several languages. It shows his life from his ascension to emperor in 1908 at the age of two to his life as a commoner in 1962 Maoist China. Pu Yi was born in Peking, China in 1906. He was raised in his father's mansion in the Forbidden City until he was two years old and crowned of emperor of China. He "ruled" for four years under the Qing (Ch'ing) dynasty. The Ch'ing dynasty began when Dorgon, the son of Nurhachi carried out his father and brother's elaborate plan to overthrow the Chinese emperor of the Ming dynasty. Using powers amassed by his family, he was able to carry out their plan through his nephew, Chun-chih, leading to the demise of a dynasty and the suicide of the current emperor. This led way for the "new rulers who were not Chinese, but Manchus, people of Manchuria." (Kramer, 1987, p. xvi)

Even though they were not Chinese, the Manchu rulers were able to keep a long dynasty from 1644 to 1912. This was largely due to their cutting edge policies and tactics at the time. In contrast to other foreigners who had previously conquered and ruled China through naked military force, the Manchus based their rule on some form of popular support. In their administration of the area we call China, they also gave power to the other

four races of the land, the Hans (Chinese), the Mongols, the Tibetans and the Mohammedans. The Manchus also actively supported Chinese culture and the arts to the extent that their own written language became little more than a formality. Chinese scholars were invited to staff the Ch'ing bureaucracy and Chinese generals, once they had surrendered, were often given higher and better positions than they had held under the Mings. In fact, the Manchus became Sinicized. (Kramer, 1987, p. xvi)

As the years, much of the same policies and culture of the Chinese people continued into the modern era. Through there was foreign influence, it was not strong enough to change the significant traditions, fashion, music and other cultural phenomena that made the country unique. This was the world of the Pu Yi as a child, created for him by his great-aunt, the Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi. Tzu Hsi was a power-hungry woman. She worked their way up from a concubine, Lady Yehonala, to Empress Dowager. Her impressive feat was largely due to the fact that she was the only one who could provide an heir to the pure-blooded Manchu throne on behalf of the current emperor, Hsien Feng. Once her son had been crowned emperor, she claimed he was too young to make decisions for the country and took the leadership on herself. Her history of brutality and luxury were largely unmatched by any other Empress in Chinese history.

Her unofficial reign continued until her death, her violent temper growing continuously stronger each and every day. She would often have her eunuchs beaten or killed for small things such as noticing an imperfection on her face or finding a knot in her hair. She was also directly responsible for

the death of the wives of two emperors, those emperors being her son and nephew. Pu Yi described Tzu Hsi as, “ a very ugly, thin-faced and emancipated old woman” (1987, p. 4) when recalling his earliest memories. Many people had different ways to explain Hsi’s horrific deeds in a more positive light. In the introduction of the English translation of “ The Last Manchu”, Paul Kramer wrote; Apologists of the Empress Dowager have claimed that her excesses were the outbursts of a proud and patriotic woman suffering from the frustrations of a ruler who was witnessing the dismemberment of her kingdom by her enemies as well as foreign powers to tamper with the dynasty. (1988, p. xx) Though Pu Yi was brought up as an emperor, by 1912, the empire fell to the new Chinese Republic. All those working in the Forbidden City were given the “ Articles of Favourable Treatment,” a treaty of sorts with the government that allowed approximately 4 000 000 dollars to go towards allowing all those in the city to go on with their daily lives and jobs as if the empire were still at its full power. Pu Yi grew up in this environment with various tutors and eunuchs serving him in the city and somewhat imprisoning him within it as to keep the terms of “ The Most Favourable Treatment Treaty. ”

The Republic was not very well approved by the people and as such, various “ warlords” started springing up across the country. This mainly started in 1916 and ended around 1928 when the Republican, Communist and Japanese powers began rising up. During this “ warlord” period, each warlord had their own lands, followers and political views, splitting the country into several factions. Some of these warlords were in favour of a restored monarchy and tried to gain favour with Pu Yi. One such person was Chang

Hsun. Hsun temporarily dissolved Parliament and restored the empire, but with himself as the true head. In preparation, Hsun had met with the emperor, Pu Yi, and discussed his plan to allow Pu Yi to reassume his position as emperor. Pu Yi at first proclaimed, “ I am too young. What I know is very limited,” (1987, p. 66) Despite this, he was eventually convinced by his tutors to accept his short-lived position. This lasted for a few days before the republic reassumed power and punished Hsun for his crimes.

Some years later, the republican leader came to the forbidden city to abolish the “ Articles of Favourable Treatment. ” They kicked Pu Yi along with his wives, eunuchs and fellow nobility out of the palace and into the mansion of Pu Yi’s father, Prince Chun. The new treaty forbade them from entering the Forbidden City and changed the amount of money dedicated to the “ Articles of Favourable Treatment” to around 500 000 dollars. At this point, Pu Yi had gained a very favourable impression of foreign countries due to his british tutor, Reginald Johnson. This impression inspired him to move from his father’s mansion, to the Japanese embassy in Tientsin From there, he planned to eventually move abroad to study.

Pu Yi never ended up realizing his dream study abroad. In effect, Pu Yi and his party’s short trip to Tientsin lasted for around 5 years. At this time, the world was in turmoil. It was between the two world wars and at this time, Japan had a positive relationship with China. Japan at the time was slowly increasing their power in China and even tried to interbreed with the Chinese royal family to get their political way in the nation. Elsewhere in the world, communism was growing in Russia, the depression had started to hit several

countries and political turmoil was evident. Near the end of Pu Yi's stay in Tientsin, the Japanese had begun their conquest, including the northeastern region of China. In an attempt to expand north, they called this region Manchukuo, an "independent state," housing Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Korean residents.

The Japanese gave Pu Yi "Chief Executive" status within the new country. They claimed that it was the first step in restoring the Ch'ing dynasty. At this time, Pu Yi lived in a palace once again. The Japanese army claimed they needed Pu Yi for reuniting the people groups through the emperor whom they love. In truth, the Japanese were the main dictative force in the region, crossing the boundaries in the "democratic state" they had created. Pu Yi was selected as a psychological tool in Japan's movement into Siberia and Outer Mongolia. The Japanese hoped that the people in those regions would respond better to Pu Yi's dynastic rule than the Soviet Union's communist rule. The Japanese army hoped that the fear of rebellion would cripple the morale of the Soviet soldiers, allowing them to more easily take those regions.

During this "restoration," Pu Yi was subject to majesty without power. During a visit with the Japanese emperor, Hirohito, Pu Yi assumed that he himself would receive the same treatment in Manchukuo as Hirohito did in Japan. This soon proved vastly incorrect. The Japanese used him as a puppet, giving him scripted speeches and mandatory documents to sign. Pu Yi was constantly in fear of his life due to the Japanese expansionism and constant surveillance in his palace. He began to go insane, becoming immersed in

Buddhism and superstition, getting his servants, twenty orphaned children taken from an orphanage to work in the palace and and third and fourth consorts flogged, beaten or killed at the slightest offence. On the outside, he would constantly bribe the Japanese with his wealth and possessions to ensure his safety. During this time, many people in the nation were suffering. The economy was very low and most resources went directly to the Japanese army. In his autobiography, Pu Yi recorded a conversation between himself and a commoner recalling their story. “‘ Although we grew rice, we had to eat acorn flour,’ she explained. ‘ We had to hand over all the rice we grew to the Manchukuo government. ’” (Pu Yi, 1987, p. 274) Many citizens were also drafted into the army.

By the end of the second world war, Japan was no longer able to hold on to Manchukuo. Soon after, the area was taken over by the soviets and the Chinese communist government. Once the government fell, Pu Yi and other high-ranking officials of the Manchukuo government were held in the Soviet Union for five years. Once the five years were up, they were taken back to China as war criminals for their involvement with the Japanese conquest, and subjected to 10 years of brainwashing in a reform prison to help them leave their criminal past and become working members of China once again.

At this point, China was under the control of the communist government with Mao as the head. The philosophy of the reform prisons was very much due to communist idealism, “ A man who has been reformed is more valuable to us than jewels. ” (Pu Yi, 1987, p. 248) To the communist government, people in prison were useless as all people were considered equal. As such, they sent

out to teach them communist idealism and how to function in society, getting prisoners to understand their crime and to reintroduce them to society, step by step after admitting sincere guilt for their actions.

Pu Yi's reform followed the same structure, but as he was so far elevated from society, his path to redemption significantly harder than those of the other prisoners. He began with having never touched a doorknob in his life, to having to perform all of the menial tasks of daily life along with learning an entirely new profession. The others, who knew him well from his childhood or the Manchukuo government would constantly play fun at him since he was now an equal with the others, but lacked the education to do the basic things they could all do. All of the prisoners were required to write an autobiography to help the government learn of the Japanese war crimes in detail. The prisoners would be rewarded for truth and those who lied could redeem themselves by telling the truth at a later time. By the end of the brainwashing, the reward system proved effective. Even Pu Yi, one of the most prominent liars in the prison, learned the importance of honesty in both personal relationships as well as in government.

After several years in prison, Pu Yi was now equipped to perform all of the tasks given to him at the same level as the others. This allowed him the same free time as the others as well. He was released, to his surprise, at the same time as his fellow inmates, 10 years after imprisonment. His experiences in the prison left him a changed man.

After this point, Pu Yi became a botanist in the Forbidden City where he had grown up. He married a new wife (his four previous wives had all divorced



him) and learned the progress in the country he called home. He had went from the head of society to the bottom in much the same way as China's recognition of him. In his childhood and youth, he was regarded as a symbol of monarchy and of ancient China. As Chief Executive of Manchukuo, his "Imperial regime" was despised by the commoners. He lived in fear as they lived in starvation, giving up all they had to the Japanese soldiers, including themselves as members of their army. As a prisoner, he was regarded as a criminal to the public and his reform went as did the communist control of China, reforming it into a new nation where all were meant to be truly equal.

China's dramatic change within this fifty year period, going from extreme right-wing to extreme left-wing and everywhere in between and yet staying intact is a testament to the resilience of the nation. As with Henry Pu Yi, no matter what happened to China, they managed to survive through it all.

Even though Pu Yi and Maoist China are far behind us, "The Last Manchu" is still a wonderful read with strong themes of human nature and Chinese history.