

# A Female Politician or the Empress Dowager? — A Study of Cixi's Image from *Le Rire*, 1900

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## ABSTRACT

Empress Dowager Cixi had never walked out of the Forbidden City and Summer Palace, but her policy of supporting the Boxers during the Box movement irritated foreign powers in 1900. In response, artist Charles Lucien Léandre defamed Cixi's image with the background of Box movement on French Newspaper *La Rire*. However, Charles still reflected his respect towards Cixi in this political caricature without propaganda intention. Besides, westerner newspapers like *New York Time* and *Times* at that time focused more on Cixi's image as a skilful politician more than an immoral woman.

**Keywords:** *Image of the Empress Dowager Cixi, La Rire, Charles Lucien Léandre, Box Movement, Female Politician.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION



Figure 1 Cixi, *Le Rire* 1900

“Recent months, Empress Dowager's caricature images, published on the pictorial magazine, annoyed me a lot. These images exaggeratedly depicted a horrible Empress Dowager. I gradually have a strong desire to let the public see her realistic appearance.”

— Selected from the letters of American Enoy's wife, Edwin Hurd Conger, in 1903

The woman that Conger wanted to rehabilitate her reputation was Cixi, the last Empress Dowager of Qing Dynasty. Taking the advice from Conger, Cixi invited Conger's daughter, Katherine Carl, to paint for her, and the portrait painting was exhibited on Louis World Exhibition in the United State in 1904 [1]. The year of 1904 marked as Cixi's first step to break Qing dynasty's

traditional gender role by sharing her private appearance with the public. However, early in 1900, Cixi received media attack from the cover of on French magazine *Le Rire* on July 14th, painted by French painter Charles Lucien Léandre. Although Charles defamed Cixi's figures with an exaggerate method, the portrait was a political caricature for fun more than war propaganda for influence, proved by the political elements Charles emphasized and relatively positive comments about Cixi around 1900. This was also partly explained why this caricature did not arouse too much attention for Cixi's reactions.

## 2. WHO IS CHARLES LUCIEN LÉANDRE?

Charles Lucien Léandre was born in Champsecret, a commune in the Orne department of the north-western France, in July 22rd of 1862 and passed away in May 24th of 1934 [2]. Maybe due to the climate of the Great War era, he drew many political caricatures for French magazines like *Le Rire* and *Le Figaro*. He turned into famous in France when he was young with many rewards like the bronze medal at the Exposition Universelle in 1889 for his painting, *la Mère ou «Dormio cor meum vigilat»* ("Je dors mais mon coeur veille") in 1889 and a gold medal at this contest at the next Exposition Universelle in 1900, and the Medal of Honour of the Society of French Artists in 1921. He created Society of Humourist Painters and served as an officer of the Legion of Honour in 1925 [2].

In this artwork, Charles portrayed Qing Empire Empress Dowager Cixi and expressed her political role in the box movement. Cixi was born in the tenth lunar month in 1835 with a family background of the governmental employees for generations. Her status got promoted by giving birth to Emperor Xian feng's Grand Son, Zaichun, on 27th April 1856, when the Second Opium War outbreaked. On August 22, 1861, Emperor Xian feng passed away and appointed eight princes and ministers as the Board of Regent since Qing's successor, Cixi's five-year-old son was too young, but Cixi disagreed with Xian feng's decision and launched a coup with only three death instead. After that, she started her reign behind the thrones of her son and two other adopted sons, from 1861 to the end of Qing dynasty [3].

### **3. CIXI AND BOX MOVEMENT**

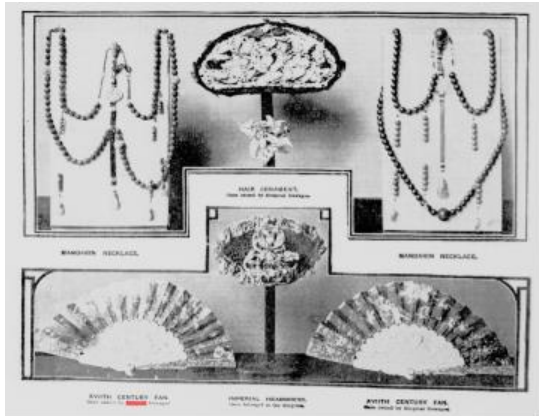
The historical background of this portrait was dated back to the origin of Box Movement. Although Qing Empire approved foreigners' free movement in the land of China, the cultural tension between western visitors and local Chinese still remained. Box movement's members were all farmers with strong anti-foreigners and patriotic sentiments. They did not understand the significance of railway for industrialization, instead, they accused that railway construction damaged their local "dragon's vein," and the natural environment. When Yellow River floods occurred in 1898, following with droughts in North China in 1900, those farmers enhanced their belief that Christianity was a disruptive heterodox sect and they brought divine punishment. In 1970s, the Boxers declared their vow of killing all the foreigners and their Chinese collaborators, and the anti-missionary riots turned more violent, including the behaviours like burning missionaries, attacking converts and cutting the railway and telegraphs [4].

The Qing Empire officers initially kept a blind eye on the boxers' radical attack towards the foreigners under Cixi's acquiescence. They made an excuse to the foreign authorities that their local government was too weak to suppress the riots. However, in 1900, the Qing court overtly subsidized the Boxers and supported them with army forces to attack the foreigners [4]. During the box movement, 231 foreigners and thousands of Chinese Christians were killed, which enraged the foreign power [4]. Finally, on August 4th, 1900, foreign allied forces from Japan, Russia, Britain, America, France, Austria and Italy reached Beijing. The Boxers and Qing government forces were defeated, and Cixi took the emperor to flee away from Beijing. The allied troops did not evacuate Beijing until September 17th, 1901, after Li hongzhang was appointed to sign the Boxer Protocol with the foreign powers for peace settlement [4].

### **4. THE SYMBOL OF IMPERIAL POWER IN CHARLE'S PORTRAIT**

In Charles's Cixi caricature, it also reflects the idea that Cixi was the main designer of the box movement, showed by the details of her court dress, knife and the dead in the background. Charles Lucien Léandre made Cixi dress a court dress with a fancy mandarin as the true rule of Great Qing Empire. He selected a relatively high horizontal line to depict that Cixi was deeply looking down at certain document and her glasses almost dropped off from her nasal ridge, with a the blood-stained knife on her left hand and a fancy fan on her right. The tassel and the feathers from Cixi's headwear formed several diagonal lines to drive the audience's attention towards the left corner, where the nude bodies and killed heads are bonded on a red pole. The death referred to the Christian victims during the box movement, since Qing people culturally did not cut their long hairs. The red colour of pole exactly corresponded to the blood on the knife, indicating that Cixi was the direct killers of these Christians or westerns. Cixi seemed to be satisfied at the outcome that the radical boxers killed many foreigners, as Charles shows, the curve-shape tassels beneath the brim was dancing joyfully when Cixi was waving her fan.

Besides, Charles made Cixi appearance ugly with long cilia, wrinkle, two tiger teeth, thick lip, a pair of glasses and yellow skin. However, the portrait was not a propaganda because Charles's main goals is to shape a political image of Cixi, represented its detailed in the Empress Dowager's court dress and headwear. First, it was unusual for a female to wear a court dress, according to the seventy-eighth section of Qing Dynasty's manuscript, Empress and Empress Dowager only wore court dress and headwear on some celebration days [5]. It is less persuasive to argue that Charles painted court dress wrong due to lack knowledge about Qing dynasty's dressing regulations as the ritual system, since he did summarize fan and clothes correctly. The fan in Cixi's hand is verified with the one of Empress Dowager Cixi's private objects from American Art Galleries exhibition, New-York tribune reported on March 10, 1907 [6]. According to the rule, the Empress Dowager's court dress should be in yellow and light olive color, decorated with the patterns of five-claw Dragon Satin and Phoenix Dibold [5]. There was a dragon pattern on the left arm of Cixi's cloth indeed. When Charles designed Empress Dowager wearing court dress as a general impression, it indicates Cixi's role of regent rather than a female from the imperial harem.



**Figure 2** Cixi's private objects, American Art Galleries exhibition

Another political feature was the headwear decorations with one-eyed peacock feather, which was also unfounded in female dressing rule. As Qing Dynasty's manuscript recorded, only the emperor and his sons were allowed to wear a red-velvet-top headwear, and some ministers from their royal family had the permission to own and wore it as a holy reward from the emperor. Peacock feathers were headwear decorations for clan princes, clan dukes, civil ministers and imperial guards, and their number of peacock eye corresponded to the rank. As Charles designed, Cixi's one-eyed peacock feather in this portrait was the regular headwear for a civil minister, indicating that she was supposed to be a civil minister of the Great Qing. It was also probably that Charles did not know specific rule of Qing imperial dressing, but the mistakes of headwear enhanced Cixi's political character instead of a female in Charles' eyes.

Besides, Charles also demonstrated Cixi as a political figure through her clothes and historical background intentionally, since those details were missed in the other politicians' portraits he made. For instances, the portrait of Britain Queen Victoria did not have a background related with any political event, but the shining crown and ear-size earring were highlighted to declare the power and wealth. Charles made war background for Qing minister Li hongzhang's portrait, but Li hongzhang wore a normal clothing even though he was in a formal occasion of representing Qing Empire to negotiate peace settlement with the foreign forces in 1900.



**Figure 3** A S.M. La Reine Victoria, 1897



**Figure 4** Li hongzhang Aug. 18, 1900

In addition to political features, the form of Cixi's portrait was far to count as war propaganda was because that Cixi's reputation around 1900 was not bad enough by a look at contemporaneous newspapers. For instances, according to *New York Times* on Jun 24, in 1900, journalist John Foord admired Cixi, saying that the United States' former Minister Col. Denby viewed Cixi as the greatest women in the world, which could be compared with Catherine, Elizabeth and Victoria. In response to Kang Yuwei's accusation of Cixi that she was an old lady of taking daily delight in licentious pleasure," never read books and concerned about foreign affairs, John rehabilitated Cixi by showing her growth as Qing empire's ruler. He mentioned that Cixi experienced many Late Qing's challenges and witnessed many deaths, including her father and husband, but still kept healthy and taken the burden of her responsibility for the Qing empire. John Foord also refuted the Cixi had studied the calligraphy after she rule the empire to made up her uneducated background [7]. As Charles added a pair of glass to Cixi in the caricature, they believed that Cixi was a highly educated politician. London newspaper *The Times* in 1889 also elaborated Cixi's administration in China. Even, the author commented that Cixi should "be placed in the same rank with great and successful rulers of men like Kanghsi [Kang xi] and Kien-lung [Qian long] [8]. Unlike Chinese criticism about Cixi's immoral behaviours in her political career, these British and American newspapers selected another perspective to admire Cixi's intelligence in political affairs.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Overall, caricature essentially was to draw figure with exaggerated method. Charles defamed Cixi's appearance, but his portrait was a political cartoon rather than war propaganda. First, Charles put more efforts to shape a female politician rather than the appearance of Empress Dowager during the Box Movement. This motivation was more obvious when comparing Cixi portrait to his other caricatures of Queen Victoria and Minister Li hongzhang. Second, propaganda was supposed to include emotional hostility, while Charles, as an artist who never visit China, his attitude towards Cixi was unknown. Meanwhile, some newspapers from the West gave

positive comments on Cixi, viewing her as an excellent female politician.

Another question inspired from this paper was that if Cixi's reputation was hurt heavily in 1900, supported by this political caricature and relevant newspaper comments, what factors led to her reputation went worse from 1900 to 1904. It was meaningful to explore since Cixi did have a bad reputation before 1905 that both Katherine Carl and Hubert Vos, who had painted for Cixi had commented that the Empress Dowager's first impression was not as horrible as they had heard from the press, instead, Cixi was charm and gently [9] [10].

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