

**CHAPTER**  
**28****HISTORYMAKERS** **Cixi**  
*Conservative Force***Section 1**

*"If we cannot rely on the supernatural [powers], can we not rely upon the hearts of the people?"—Cixi, arguing for support of the Boxer attacks*

During the 19th century, Cixi rose from relative obscurity to become the most powerful person in China. She ruled from behind the scenes, but with few challenges to her power. As China flirted with reforms to help face the challenge posed by European powers, Cixi's conservative views ended those changes.

Cixi began her career as a low-ranking wife to the Chinese emperor. Her fortunes improved in 1856, when she bore him his only son. When the emperor died five years later, Cixi and another former wife moved quickly to seize power. When members of the council of eight elder officials objected, the two women had three of them put to death and had the five others removed from office.

Cixi now shared power with the other empress and a reform-minded prince. During this time, the government weathered two conflicts: the Taiping Rebellion in the south, which ended in 1864, and the Nien Rebellion, which was crushed in 1868. The government then enacted some reforms. Schools were built to allow the Chinese to study foreign languages, and the army was modernized. In the middle 1860s, though, Cixi reduced the power of the prince who had backed these changes. Gradually, she undid those reforms.

Over time, Cixi became the real power, and she controlled China for almost 50 years. As advisers spoke to her son, now the emperor, she sat behind a screen, making all the important decisions. In 1873, the emperor finally reached adulthood, and Cixi could no longer rule as regent. Nevertheless, she still maintained control from behind the scenes. Using a network of spies, she could remain informed about the actions of the government.

When the emperor died in 1875, Cixi stepped in and named his successor. She broke with tradition to choose her four-year-old nephew, whom she adopted. With a child once again on the throne, Cixi became regent. The young emperor's actions were limited by their relationship. As her son, he owed her obedience. Aware that Cixi had made him emperor, he was equally aware that she could unseat him.

Cixi continued to rule actively for several more years. Then in 1889, she retired to a luxurious palace that she had built for herself. In the mid-1890s, however, China was defeated in war by the Japanese. Her nephew, now an adult, joined forces with a group of reformers to try to strengthen China. Concerned officials in the government contacted the empress, who returned to Beijing. She overthrew the emperor and retook control of the government.

Anger and frustration spread throughout China, and a group of rebels called Boxers gained in popularity. They hated foreigners and hoped to rid China of all traces of foreign influence. The Boxers began to attack Christian missionaries, and a Chinese governor employed Boxers as militia troops. Cixi soon joined with a group of court officials that backed the growing movement.

The situation grew to a crisis. Foreign diplomats in Beijing worried for their safety and brought troops to protect themselves. In 1900, the Boxers began a series of attacks in the capital. When foreign powers sent more than 2,000 soldiers to Beijing, Cixi ordered her army to turn them back. She then decided to combine the Boxers with the army in an effort to drive out the foreigners. Many Europeans were killed in these attacks, but officials in the provinces did not follow Cixi's orders. Finally, a large foreign army arrived and ended the Boxer threat. Cixi then had to agree to some reforms required by the foreigners. She managed to win revenge at least on her nephew the emperor, though. The day before she died, she ordered him poisoned to ensure that he would not rule after her death.

## Questions

1. **Clarifying** Give two examples of conservative actions that Cixi took.
2. **Making Inferences** Why did the Boxers enjoy rising popularity?
3. **Making Predictions** What do you think would be the result for China of Cixi's policy of no reforms?