Vulcan Historical Review

Volume 27 Article 5

2023

Exceptional Women Ruling Millenia Apart: A Comparative Case Study

Miranda Brunn

EXCEPTIONAL WOMEN RULING MILLENIA APART: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

Miranda Brunn

Throughout the records of dynasties and kingdoms, an overwhelming majority of rulers have been male. Only recently have an increased number of nations welcomed women into government leadership. However, in certain periods, there have been exceptional instances where women came to power. This paper compares two notable cases of female leadership to reveal how women taking similar approaches to authority can yield different results. King Hatshepsut of the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty (1472–1458 BCE) and Empress Dowager Cixi of the Chinese Qing dynasty (1861–1908) had similar unusual roads to power and comparable policies of presentation. While they had definite differences in foreign relations and success, their fate in history is much the same.

Although these two dynasts inhabited vastly different cultures and were separated by over three thousand years, they faced comparable sexist power structures. Despite being one of the most advanced societies in the ancient world, Egypt during Hatshepsut's time was completely dominated by male rulers. In desperate situations, women were seen as transitory place-holders until a king could be secured. Their purpose was to co-regent with a young prince until he became old enough to rule alone. Seldom did a woman rise to the status of king in ancient Egypt. Commonly, the king's female relatives and concubines possessed privilege through their connection to him and were given titles such as "God's Wife" or "King's Mother."[1] In a similar manner, China's modernizing attempts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did little to quell its misogynistic tendencies. Women were limited to the status of Emperor's concubine, granting them meager influence. In both cultures, female consorts were in constant competitionfor the monarch's attention and the

"Despite being one of the most advanced societies during Hatshepsut's time, Egypt was completely dominated by male rulers."

chance of prestige that came with it. As in ancient Egypt, the modern Chinese viewed women as temporary guides to child emperors. In face of these impediments, King Hatshepsut and Empress Cixi established themselves as leading authorities. Furthermore, they prolonged their terms in power well beyond expectations and thus broke long- standing patriarchal norms.

Hatshepsut and Cixi both ascended to the throne surrounded by death and political necessity. In the fifteenth century BCE, Hatshepsut was born the eldest daughter of the Egyptian king Thutmose I. This position granted her some authority and land through the priestly title of "God's Wife of Amen."[2] When the king died, his son (and Hatshepsut's brother), Thutmose II, inherited the kingdom. Through marriage to this brother, Hatshepsut secured her continued association with the throne. During their marriage, her value was determined by her ability to produce a male heir. However, she failed to produce such an heir, thus leaving the throne to the two-year-old son of Thutmose II's concubine when he died in 1479 BC. Hatshepsut then became co-regent to this illegitimate nephew, Thutmose III. In doing so, she outmaneuvered the boy's birth mother for power.[3] This political strategizing demonstrates Hatshepsut's stubborn will to remain influential.

In contrast, Cixi, a descendant of a prominent Manchurian family, was chosen as one of the Xianfeng Emperor's

concubines in 1852, at the age of sixteen.[4] Just as with Hatshepsut, emphasis was placed on her duty to bear a son. In fact, she was the only consort to provide the Xianfeng Emperor with a surviving heir. Thus, when the Emperor died, Cixi and this five-year- old son took the throne. While Chinese tradition prohibited consorts from interfering in state affairs, her son's new status granted Cixi prestige.[5] Only a few years later, this son, Tongzhi Emperor, died at the age of nineteen. Cixi then placed her four-year-old nephew, Guangxu Emperor, on the throne and co-ruled with him. From the beginning of her reign in 1861 until 1881, Empress Cixi cooperatively shared her control with the late Xianfeng Emperor's widow and her nephew. The quick placement of her relative in power demonstrated Cixi's ability to keep not only herself, but also her family, associated with the dynasty. Both Hatshepsut and Cixi struggled to maintain legitimate connections to the ruling class. With the death of current male heirs, they risked losing their status and had to carefully circumvent contestations to their authority. Once they rose to leadership status, the women then had to employ equally unconventional methods to appeal to their subjects.

To maintain control of their kingdoms and avoid backlash, both dynasts took precautionary measures to quell opposition. In both cases, religion was used strategically. Hatshepsut claimed a personal connection to the god of life, Amen, and stated that he commanded her to lead Upper and Lower Egypt.[6] Fear of and reverence for this god legitimized her position and prevented potential uprisings against the unusual female king. However, propagandist religion did not consistently support Empress Cixi as it did Hatshepsut. The long- standing Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven (the gods' approval of a ruler based on their fairness) constantly loomed over the empress. If the country descended into hardship, the ruling class was said to have lost the support of the gods, no longer possessing

Empress Dowager Cixi, circa 1890. Wikimedia Commons.

the Mandate of Heaven. This often led to rebellions and new government officials. Due to this threat, Empress Cixi carefully presented herself as "kindly and joyous," cooperating with her co-rulers and accepting foreign council.[7]

Another tactic used by the two women was propaganda in the form of monuments. This approach had varied results between the kingdoms. Hatshepsut placed many acclamatory inscriptions and statues of herself within the Temple of Karnak, a significant place of worship for all Egyptians.[8] After her coronation, she also constructed the two largest obelisks in the world. These structures impressed Hatshepsut's subjects and were considered a sign of blessing from the gods.[9] Likewise, Empress Cixi commissioned the restoration

of the prized Summer Palace, which had previously been destroyed during a British invasion (1856–1860). In doing this, she attempted to re-establish the country's dignity and assert herself as the source of such national pride. While this project had "symbolic value" in "wiping clean … China's humiliations," the empire did not have sufficient funds to complete Cixi's proposal.[10] When palace reconstruction was eventually completed in the late 1880s, it was viewed as a useless diversion of necessary money in the effort to modernize.[11] Thus, Empress Cixi's efforts to impress her subjects were not as successful as Hatshepsut's, due to the different states of their economies.

Foreign encounters were another area in which the dynasties contrasted. In the ninth year of her reign, Hatshepsut established a fruitful trading relationship with the nearby nation of Punt. After several years of planning and using extensive resources, the expedition brought back goods such as incense and ebony. This success marked Hatshepsut as a "shrewd stateswoman and businesswoman."[12] In the minds of the Egyptian people, Hatshepsut's economic successes improved her image once again. The same cannot be said for Empress Cixi. During the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), Cixi supported attacks on hundreds of foreign nationals and Christian missionaries from Japan, Russia, the United States, and several European countries, prompting intervention from outside forces. As a result, the Boxer Protocol was signed between China and eight allied nations, "allowing" numerous foreign troops to enter the country. This agreement, along with a series of other related unequal treaties, angered the nationalistic Chinese people.[13] This event blatantly challenged the Qing Dynasty's Mandate of Heaven, specifically challenging the Empress Dowager.

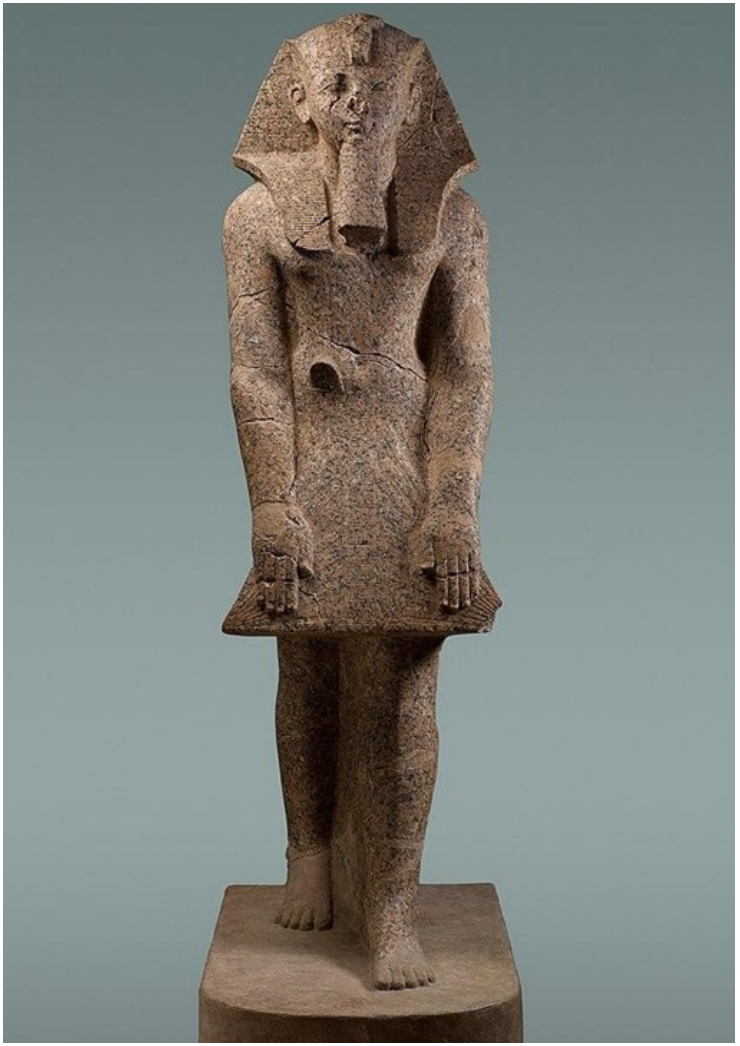
When the two women faced challenges to their authority, they attempted similar initial solutions, but diverged later into their respective policies. As Hatshepsut's nephew grew older, her purpose in the eyes of tradition began to wane. To remedy this, she began portraying herself as a man. Several statues and images depict Hatshepsut standing in a masculine pose, with male anatomy and a lack of feminine features, wearing men's clothing. This new appearance presented her as a respectable, elder male fit to co-regent alongside Thutmose III. This masculine identity did not challenge or emasculate the younger king, such as the presence of an older woman might. Similarly, Empress Cixi adopted masculine traits on a smaller interpersonal scale. According to one of the Empress's servants, she "always wanted to be a man" and expected to be spoken to as one.[14] This tough persona gave her credibility when making provincial decisions. Although this image was not as intense as Hatshepsut's, both women's presentations show their need to present a masculine display of dominance.

Though both rulers presented themselves in similar manners, their approaches diverged when dealing with rivals and successors. As her career went on, Hatshepsut accepted her nephew as an equal. Through temple artwork and celebrations, she elevated Thutmose III to equal footing as a co-king.[15] Until her death in 1458 BCE, the two ruled together in a "partnership of mutual dependence."[16] In contrast, Cixi rallied against her nephew's attempts at modernization and reform. She then had this nephew, the Guangxu Emperor,captured and placed on house arrest. As the empire began to fall apart, he died of poisoning one day before Empress Cixi in November of 1908. This coincidence led many to believe that the Empress ordered the murder of her own nephew, further tainting her image.[17] The country was then overtaken by China's Nationalist party.

Although both leaders practiced similar techniques, their methods had vastly different outcomes, resulting in disparate

historical legacies. Despite leading her country through a prosperous era, subsequent rulers attempted to erase Hatshepsut from Egypt's records. After becoming the sole monarch in the wake of Hatshepsut's death, Thutmose III started a multi-year campaign to destroy all evidence of his aunt's power. He also curtailed future female access to power by limiting the influence given to anyone holding the title "God's Wife of Amen." Future kings became so suspicious of women's control that they no longer claimed "King's Wives." The wife's role was taken over by the king's mother because most monarchs believed she "would do nothing to jeopardize … [her] own son."[18] While Hatshepsut was alive, she redefined a royal woman's place and power in society. However, noble women were more constrained in the period immediately following her death than they had been in the past. Empress Cixi was also demonized after her death, but for her perceived failings instead of her unprecedented success. Due to several miscalculated actions, she was blamed for the empire's downfall. During a time when modernization should have been a priority, Cixi was concerned with preserving the past. She was labeled the "Dragon Lady"[19] and later cast alongside many of China's other catastrophic women rulers, such as Madame Mao (Mao Zedong's wife, who tried to brutally overtake the communist party after his death). Though Cixi was not forgotten, she was recast as an example of "female failure," and a warning against allowing future female leaders.

Even in today's world, American female candidates for power face significant prejudice. In a 1993 study,[20] researchers Huddy and Terkildsen found that possessing feminine traits made candidates less likely to obtain a position in national office. Thus, women seen as "compassionate" and "family-oriented" were limited to local levels of office. Those who presented themselves as "tough" and "ambitious" were perceived by voters as more adequate leaders for higher positions. A similar masculine appeal was integral to



Statue of Hatshepsut in Masculine Garb, circa 1479 B.C.Wikimedia Commons.

Hatshepsut's strategy and added to her legitimacy in office. In contrast, despite occasional efforts to demand equal treatment, Empress Cixi maintained a "personal and feminine" appearance, leading others to believe she was not an adept leader.[21] Cixi's femininity may have contributed to her being cast as a failure, demonstrating that women are often blamed for their mistakes simply because they are women, while men are not held to the same standard.

> **China's attempt at modernization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did surprisingly little to quell its misogynistic tendencies.**

Regardless of their success, or lack thereof, both King Hatshepsut and Empress Dowager Cixi were viewed negatively by subsequent generations. Despite attempts to solidify and legitimize their status, future narratives failed to accurately represent their ambitions and accomplishments. Sexism challenged and hindered both women, leading them to unconventional methods of ruling. Despite thousands of years of evolution, prejudice continues to be an ongoing issue for today's women. By comparing Hatshepsut's and Cixi's stories to the challenges women face today, it becomes clear that much improvement is still needed. To date, only thirty-two percent of countries worldwide have elected a woman as the head of state at some point in their history. In many nations, the United States included, patriarchal norms have discouraged and prevented women from joining the highest ranks of government. In an attempt to break this glass ceiling, female candidates are required to portray and exaggerate masculine traits—traits that are often not necessary to be a successful ruler. Still, this tactic has been widely unsuccessful. As with Hatshepsut and Cixi, in the rare cases in which women rise to positions of high power, they are scrutinized and vilified more so than their male counterparts. This resistance leads them to take extraordinary precautions, which are not necessary for men. Despite arduous efforts and notable advancements, women leaders are often forgotten or denounced. As a result, before gender equality in government can be reached, countries must examine their basic assumptions regarding authority and re-evaluate the necessary aspects of a leader, placing less emphasis on gender and more on character.

ENDNOTES

1 Kara Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King: Hatshepsut's Rise to Power in Ancient Egypt* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2014), 6.

2 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 6.

3 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* back cover.

4 Jung Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 3.

5 Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 17.

6 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 40.

7 Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 50.

8 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 89.

9 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 113.

10 Orville Schell and John Delury, *Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-First Century*, (London: Abacus, 2016), 62.

11 Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 70.

12 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 134.

13 Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 92.

14 Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 81.

15 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 172.

16 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 172.

17 Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 438.

18 Cooney, *The Woman Who Would Be King,* 222.

19 Schell and Delury, *Wealth and Power*, 61.

20 Leonie Huddy and Nayda Terkildsen, "The Consequences of Gender Stereotypes for Women Candidates at Different Levels and Types of Office." *Political Research Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1993): 523.

21 Chang, *Empress Dowager Cixi*, 382.