


# The Last Empress: A Novel

*By Anchee Min*

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**The Last Empress: A Novel** By Anchee Min

The last decades of the nineteenth century were a violent period in China's history marked by humiliating foreign incursions and domestic rebellion, ultimately ending in the demise of the Ch'ing dynasty. The only constant during this tumultuous time was the power wielded by one person, the resilient, ever-resourceful Tzu Hsi, Lady Yehonala -- or Empress Orchid, as readers came to know her in Anchee Min's critically acclaimed novel covering the first part of her life.

The Last Empress is the story of Orchid's dramatic transition from a strong-willed, instinctive young woman to a wise and politically savvy leader who ruled China for more than four decades. Moving from the intimacy of the concubine quarters into the spotlight of the world stage, Orchid must face not only the perilous condition of her empire but also a series of devastating personal losses, as first her son and then her adopted son succumb to early death. Yearning only to step aside, and yet growing constantly into her role, only she—allied with the progressives, but loyal to the conservative Manchu clan of her dynasty—can hold the nation's rival factions together.

Anchee Min offers a powerful revisionist portrait based on extensive research of one of the most important figures in Chinese history. Viciously maligned by the western press of the time as the "Dragon Lady," a manipulative, blood-thirsty woman who held onto power at all costs, the woman Min gives us is a compelling, very human leader who assumed power reluctantly, and who sacrificed all she had to protect those she loved and an empire that was doomed to die.

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## Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Power is a here-today, gone-tomorrow concept in Chinese history, especially for women. In her previous novel, *Empress Orchid*, Anchee Min covered the first part of the life of Tzu Hsi, or Empress Orchid. Now, in *The Last Empress*, the empress is a widow, mother of the only male heir of the now-deceased emperor, and in a formidable position. Still, she must contend with palace intrigue on all fronts; even her eunuchs are bribed. She must put up with the smiling faces of men and women who mean her great harm, and, worst of all, her son takes up with prostitutes and dies of veneral disease. She adopts her nephew to be emperor, treats him like a son, and despairs of his weakness. Constant deceit is not the only difficulty which must be faced: incursions of foreigners and domestic rebellion are also part of this violent period at the end of the 19th century. There is the love-hate relationship with the Japanese, the Boxer Rebellion, and widespread mistrust of Western foreigners. Yet Empress Orchid believes that they must appease these factions in order to preserve the dynasty and the throne. All these problems converge to bring the Ch'ing Dynasty to its eventual demise.

A disclaimer: do not read *The Last Empress* as straight historical fact. Anchee Min makes no bones about the fact that her writing is meant to "rehabilitate" crucial female figures in Chinese history. Whichever account of Tzu Hsi is correct, the historical tradition that she was an overbearing harridan, selfish, greedy, and bloodthirsty or Min's portrayal of her as a loving mother, trying to protect her country and longing to step down but prevented from doing so by her wishy-washy son, *The Last Empress* is an endlessly interesting look at palace life, that hermetically sealed world that once existed in China. --*Valerie Ryan*

From Publishers Weekly
Min's *Empress Orchid* tracked the concubine Orchid's path to becoming Empress Dowager Tzu Hsi; this revisionist look at her long years behind her son Tung Chih's throne (1863–1908) won't disappoint Orchid's fans. Recounted through Tzu Hsi's first-person, the early chapters encompass her trials as a young "widow," as co-regent with the late emperor's wife and as a mother. An engaging domestic drama gives way to pedestrian political history; Tzu Hsi lectures like a popular historian on palace intrigue, military coups, the Boxer Rebellion and conflicts with Russia, France and Japan. Though tears flow, there is little passion (save Tzu Hsi's erotic but chaste longing for Yung Lu, commander of the emperor's troops). Min's empress adopts a notably modern psychologizing tone ("How much was Guang-hsu affected when he was wrenched from the family nest?"), earthy language ("You are the most wretched fucking demon I know!") and notes of historical prescience (including what "future critics" will say). Min attacks the popular conception of Tzu Hsi as a corrupt, ruthless, power-hungry assassin, but the results read less like a novel than a didactic memoir. *(Mar.)*
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From Booklist
Min completes her stupendous two-volume historical novel about China's Empress Tzu Hsi, or Orchid, an indomitable and forward-thinking leader who was demonized, conspired against, feared, and worshipped. In *Empress Orchid* (2004), Min has concubine Orchid tell the story of her unlikely rise to power as she rules on her infant son's behalf after the emperor's death in 1862. As the second novel begins, the debauched heir ascends to the throne only to die, wretchedly, at 19. Her valiant attempt to bring her deranged sister's son to the throne also fails, forcing Orchid to remain at the helm of a starving and fractious nation under siege by Japan, Russia, France, and England. The Forbidden City is a snake pit, and viciously sexist traditions and wily enemies impede Orchid at every turn. Yet she rules courageously and strategically for nearly 50 years

as territory is lost to foreigners, insurgencies rise, assassins lurk, and she is forced to deny her love for the heroic general Yung Lu. Min distills and transcends a vast amount of long hidden, highly significant historical fact to create a brilliantly imagined and pellucid novel possessing all the drama and angst of a Greek tragedy in its portrayal of an unjustly maligned, truly extraordinary woman leader. *Donna Seaman*
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**Allison Stiffler:**

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