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Puyi

The Last Emperor — The Boy Who Inherited an Empire

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Free Sample · Chapter One

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PART ONE

The Dragon Throne, 1906–1912

龙椅

Chapter One

A Child in the Northern Mansion

北府童年

The House of Prince Chun

On the north side of Beijing, beside the shimmering expanse of the Shichahai lakes, stood one of the great princely residences of the Qing capital. Its walls enclosed courtyards, halls, gardens, rockeries, and ornamental pavilions; its gates were guarded; its household ran to hundreds of servants. It was known as the Northern Mansion, the Beifu, and it belonged to the line of the Princes Chun, one of the most politically important branches of the imperial clan in the last decades of the dynasty. Here, on the fourteenth day of the first lunar month of the thirty-second year of the Guangxu reign, corresponding to 7 February 1906, a son was born to Zaifeng, the second Prince Chun, and his wife Youlan.

The child was named Puyi. The first character of his name, pu, marked his generation within the imperial clan, a generational character shared by all of his cousins of the same rank. The second, yi, carried the sense of joy or harmony. He was the eldest son of a young prince who was himself the half-brother of the reigning emperor. No one at the time of his birth expected him to become emperor. But in the Qing court of 1906, expectations were dangerous

things, and the family into which Puyi was born had already been touched twice by the throne.

To understand why, we must go back a generation. Puyi's grandfather, Yixuan, the first Prince Chun, was the seventh son of the Daoguang Emperor. In 1875, when the young Tongzhi Emperor died without an heir, the Empress Dowager Cixi, who was Tongzhi's mother and the most powerful figure at court, broke with dynastic custom to place on the throne a child of her own choosing: Zaitian, the three-year-old son of Yixuan. Zaitian's mother was Cixi's younger sister. The boy reigned as the Guangxu Emperor. By choosing a child from her own extended family, and by choosing a child of the same generation as the deceased emperor rather than the next one, Cixi ensured that she would continue to rule as regent for many years. The Princes Chun were thus bound to Cixi by blood and by obligation, and their mansion stood in the long shadow of the Forbidden City.

Zaifeng, Puyi's father, was a son of Yixuan by a secondary consort, Lady Liugiya. He was therefore Guangxu's half-brother. In 1901, still in his teens, he had been sent to Germany to deliver the court's formal apology for the murder of the German minister Clemens von Ketteler during the Boxer Uprising, a humiliating mission that he carried out with dignity and that gave him, for a Qing prince, an unusual glimpse of the modern world. Shortly afterward Cixi arranged his marriage to Youlan, the daughter of Ronglu, one of her most trusted Manchu officials. The marriage was a political reward and a political bond at once. Its first son, Puyi, was born into the inner circle of the Empress Dowager's power.

Childhood Among the Women

Of Puyi's earliest years in the Northern Mansion we know relatively little, and most of what we know comes from his own later recollections, colored by everything that happened afterward. He remembered the household as a world of women: his grandmother, Lady Liugiya, who doted on him and would not let him out of her sight; his mother; the many nurses and maidservants of a princely establishment. He remembered being carried rather than walking. He remembered the rhythm of the household seasons, the festivals, the ancestral offerings. He would later write that his grandmother loved him more than anyone else in his childhood, and that the shock of his removal from her nearly broke her.

The world of a Qing prince's son was a world of ritual. Even in infancy, a child of the imperial clan was surrounded by forms: the correct modes of address, the gestures of respect owed to elders, the hierarchy of servants, the seasonal sacrifices. The Manchu nobility of the late Qing lived by an intricate code that combined Manchu clan traditions with the Confucian ritual order of Chinese imperial culture. The Northern Mansion maintained its own ancestral shrine and its own household calendar. A child absorbed these forms before he could understand them.

He also absorbed something else: the extraordinary deference that surrounded any male child of high rank. From the earliest age, Puyi was accustomed to having his wishes anticipated and his whims indulged. This was not peculiar to him; it was the ordinary condition of privileged children in elite households. But in his case the pattern would be magnified, within a few months, to a scale that no household could match.

The Empire in 1906

The China into which Puyi was born was an empire in crisis. The Qing dynasty, founded by Manchu conquerors who had swept south through the Great Wall in 1644, had ruled for more than two and a half centuries. At its height in the eighteenth century, under the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong emperors, it had been one of the largest and most prosperous states on earth, doubling the territory of the preceding Ming dynasty and presiding over a population that grew to some three hundred million. But the nineteenth century had brought a cascade of disasters: the Opium Wars with Britain, the vast and devastating Taiping Rebellion, the loss of territory and sovereignty through the so-called unequal treaties, defeat by Japan in 1895, and the catastrophe of the Boxer Uprising of 1900, which ended with foreign armies occupying Beijing and the court fleeing to Xi'an.

By 1906 the court had returned, chastened, and was attempting a program of reform that came to be called the New Policies. The ancient civil service examination system, which had for more than a thousand years selected officials through tests on the Confucian classics, was abolished in 1905. New schools, modern armies, and a reorganized central government were planned. In 1906 the court announced its intention to prepare for a constitution. Students went abroad in great numbers, especially to Japan, and returned with new ideas: nationalism, republicanism, revolution. Among them, the revolutionary organization led by Sun Yat-sen, the Tongmenghui, founded in Tokyo in 1905, openly called for the overthrow of the Manchus.

The great question hanging over the dynasty was whether it could reform fast enough to survive. And the man nominally at its head, the Guangxu Emperor, was a prisoner.

The Emperor in the Lake Palace

Guangxu had come of age in the late 1880s and taken formal power, though Cixi never truly relinquished it. In the summer of 1898, influenced by reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, he issued a torrent of edicts aimed at modernizing the state: reforming the examinations, creating modern schools, streamlining the bureaucracy. The program, known to history as the Hundred Days' Reform, alarmed conservatives at court. In September 1898 Cixi intervened. Several leading reformers were executed; Kang and Liang fled abroad; and Guangxu was confined to a small island pavilion, the Yingtai, in the lakes adjoining the Forbidden City. For the remaining decade of his life, he remained emperor in name but lived as a captive, brought out for rituals and audiences and otherwise kept under watch.

The relationship between Cixi and Guangxu, aunt and nephew, sovereign and prisoner, was the central political fact of the Qing court for the whole of Puyi's infancy. Both of them were aging and ill. Cixi was past seventy. Guangxu, though only in his thirties, had long been in poor health. Everyone at court understood that a succession crisis was coming. Guangxu had no children. And the question of who would follow him was one that Cixi intended to answer herself.

Autumn 1908

In the autumn of 1908, both the emperor and the Empress Dowager fell gravely ill. The court physicians recorded Guangxu's decline in detail. Cixi, too, was failing. In the final days, the court moved with the speed of long-prepared decisions.

On 13 November 1908, Cixi issued an edict. Puyi, the son of Zaifeng, was to be brought into the palace to be raised there. Zaifeng was appointed Prince Regent. The implication was unmistakable: the two-year-old boy was to be the next emperor.

Why Puyi? The sources do not record Cixi's reasoning directly, but its logic can be reconstructed. Puyi was a grandson of Yixuan, so the throne would remain in the same branch of the imperial clan that Cixi had already favored. His mother was the daughter of Ronglu, Cixi's most loyal servant. His father was young, mild, and unlikely to challenge her arrangements. And Puyi himself was an infant, which meant that real power would rest with a regent and with the court officials and imperial ladies around him. Cixi had used exactly this method in 1875. She evidently intended, if she lived, to use it again. She did not live long enough to do so.

That evening, a party of officials and eunuchs arrived at the Northern Mansion with the edict. What happened next became one of the most vivid scenes in Puyi's later telling of his life, though he could not himself have remembered it; he reconstructed it from the accounts of those who were present. The household fell into confusion. His grandmother, Lady Liugiya, who had already seen one of her family's children taken away to become emperor, is said to have fainted at the news. The child himself refused to go. He screamed, hid, struggled against the eunuchs who came to take him. The officials waited in embarrassment. In the end it was his wet nurse, a young woman from a poor family surnamed Wang, who calmed him by giving him her breast, and who was allowed to accompany him into the palace. She would remain with him, the only constant figure of his early childhood, until he was about nine years old.

Into the Palace

The child was carried through the dark streets of Beijing into the Forbidden City. He was brought before Cixi. In his memoir Puyi described a faint memory, or perhaps a memory constructed from later telling, of an ugly, emaciated old face behind a gauze curtain, and of his own terror. He cried. Cixi ordered that he be given sweets. He threw them on the floor and screamed for his nurse. The Empress Dowager, it is said, remarked irritably on the child's behavior and ordered that he be taken away to play.

The next day, 14 November 1908, the Guangxu Emperor died. He was thirty-seven years old. The following day, 15 November, Cixi died as well.

The almost simultaneous deaths of the two rivals gave rise at once to rumors that Guangxu had been murdered, so that he could not outlive Cixi and take revenge on her allies. For nearly a century the question remained speculation. In 2008, a century after his death, Chinese researchers announced that forensic analysis of Guangxu's remains and hair had revealed levels of arsenic far above what could be explained by ordinary environmental exposure, consistent with acute poisoning. Who ordered or administered the poison, if poison it was, remains unknown. Suspicion has fallen on Cixi herself, on her chief eunuch, and on the powerful official Yuan Shikai, who had betrayed Guangxu's reformers in 1898 and had good reason to fear the emperor's return to power. The case will probably never be closed. But it reminds us that Puyi's accession was not the serene transmission of a heavenly mandate. It was born in a sickroom and a deathbed, in fear and calculation, and possibly in murder.

Puyi, of course, knew nothing of this. He was not yet three years old. He knew only that he had been taken from his grandmother and his home, that he was surrounded by strangers in a vast cold place, and that everyone now bowed to him.

The Making of a Son of Heaven

According to the arrangements Cixi had made in her final edicts, Puyi was to succeed not only as Guangxu's heir but also, ritually, as the adopted heir of the earlier Tongzhi Emperor. This dual adoption was designed to satisfy the requirements of the ancestral cult, which demanded that each deceased emperor have a son to perform sacrifices for him. It also meant that the boy now had a crowd of ritual mothers: the widows and consorts of the previous emperors, who would take a commanding place in his childhood. Chief among them was Guangxu's empress, now the Empress Dowager Longyu, a niece of Cixi, a woman whom Guangxu had disliked and largely ignored, and who now found herself, unexpectedly, at the head of the imperial household.

Zaifeng, the Prince Regent, was twenty-five years old. He had been raised as a prince, not as a ruler. He was by temperament cautious, conventional, and indecisive; contemporaries described him as courteous and well meaning but out of his depth. He was now responsible for governing an empire in the middle of a reform program, beset by revolutionary agitation, provincial assertiveness, foreign pressure, and a treasury in distress. He was also, technically, a subject of his own son. In the strict logic of court ritual, the father now knelt to the child.

This inversion of the most basic Confucian relationship, the bond between father and son, would mark Puyi's entire childhood. His real father would become a distant, awkward visitor, deferring to him in public. His real mother would be kept away for years. His grandmother would never see him again as a child in her own house. The family of the Northern Mansion was dissolved, as a family, by the edict of 13 November. In its place stood the court.

Puyi would later reflect, with considerable bitterness, on what this meant. He had been made into something that was not quite a person: an institution, a symbol, a ritual object with a child inside it.

Everything around him was arranged to confirm that he was the Son of Heaven, the pivot of the cosmos, the one man under Heaven to whom all others submitted. Almost nothing was arranged to help him become a human being capable of living among others.

The enthronement ceremony was set for early December. The empire, and the child, began to prepare.

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