Name: _____

Date: _____

The Empress Dowager

In 1852, fifteen-year-old Cixi (pronounced see-shee) traveled to the Forbidden City for an imperial selection. Noble Manchu families presented their daughters, hoping they would be chosen for the emperor's household. Out of hundreds of candidates, Cixi was selected as a low-ranking concubine, or junior wife. From this unlikely beginning, she would rule China for nearly fifty years.

Life inside the Forbidden City was highly competitive, and a woman's status depended entirely on whether she had children with the emperor. In 1856, Cixi gave birth to a baby boy named Zaichun (pronounced zye-chween), who was the emperor's only surviving son. When the emperor died five years later, the child inherited the throne, and Cixi became the Empress Dowager. As his regent, she assumed absolute control, whispering to the toddler from behind a yellow silk curtain.

The Emperor Comes of Age

In 1873, seventeen-year-old Zaichun finally took control of the government, forcing Cixi to step down as regent and leave her place behind the curtain. He soon defied his mother's wishes by selecting a woman Cixi deeply despised. Confucius taught that children owed unquestioning obedience to their parents, regardless of rank. Zaichun may have been emperor, but he remained Cixi's son.

Cixi relied on a vast network of palace servants who acted as her spies, listening to Zaichun's private conversations and reading his mail. Every letter he wrote and state paper he reviewed was reported back to Cixi. When she learned that Zaichun was neglecting his duties to spend time with his new wife, Cixi ordered the newlyweds to live apart.

Frustrated and isolated, teenage Zaichun abandoned his royal duties. At eighteen, he suddenly died of smallpox. Cixi then faced the greatest political crisis of her life. Her time in power appeared over. Even worse, Zaichun's young bride was pregnant. If she gave birth to a son, Cixi would have no path back to power.

Back Behind the Curtain

The resourceful dowager found a solution. By adopting her three-year-old nephew as the next emperor, she remained Empress Dowager and continued whispering from behind the yellow silk curtain. Although Cixi opposed many Western ideas, she eagerly embraced Western comforts, spending lavishly on palaces and luxuries while millions of Chinese struggled to survive.

When her adopted son came of age, Cixi no longer had a role behind the yellow silk curtain. But when he prepared sweeping reforms to Westernize China, she invoked her authority as his adopted mother. She forced the young emperor to sign a decree declaring himself too ill to rule and asking his "Imperial Mother" to govern in his place. Cixi then imprisoned her nephew inside the Forbidden City, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Cixi's Final Gamble

In 1908, as Cixi lay on her deathbed, her nephew suddenly died. Modern forensic tests show he was poisoned with massive amounts of arsenic, and many historians believe Cixi ordered his death because she considered him incapable of ruling China. Just one day later, Cixi herself passed away. But in that final twenty-four hours, she chose one last heir: a two-year-old boy named Puyi—a final, desperate attempt to keep ruling from behind the yellow silk curtain.

The End of an Imperial Rule

With Cixi dead and a two-year-old boy on the throne, the Qing Dynasty lost the one leader who had held it together for nearly fifty years. Without her political skill, the government quickly fell into disarray. Three years later, a revolution ended the Qing Dynasty and more than two thousand years of imperial rule in China.

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Name: _____

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Fill in the Blanks

In 1852, f__f__e__n-year-old Ci__i traveled to the F__r__i__d__n City to become a low-ranking c__n__u__i__e. After giving birth to the e__p__r__r's only s__r__i__i__g son, she became Empress D__w__g__r and ruled as his r__g__nt from behind a yellow silk c__r__a__n. When s__v__n__e__n-year-old Zaichun took control of the e__p__re, palace s__i__s reported his every move. After Zaichun died of s__a__l__ox, Cixi a__o__t__d her three-year-old n__p__ew and remained in power. Although she opposed many W__s__e__n ideas, she embraced Western l__x__r__es. When the emperor tried to W__s__e__n__ze China, Cixi forced him to s__r__e__d__r power and i__p__i__o__ed him. In 1908, her nephew died from arsenic p__i__o__i__g, leading many historians to *c__n__l__de that Cixi ordered his death. One day later, Ci__i died after naming two-year-old Puyi e__p__r__r. Three years later, a r__v__l__t__on ended the Qing Dynasty and i__p__r__al rule in C__i__a.

Answer in Complete Sentence

1. How did Cixi gain status in the emperor's household?

_____

_____

_____

*2. The text states, "When the emperor died five years later, the child inherited the throne, and Cixi became the Empress Dowager. As his regent, she assumed absolute control, whispering to the toddler from behind a yellow silk curtain. What is a regent? You do not need to use a dictionary. Instead, use context cludes to make your best guess.

_____

_____

_____

3. Explain why Emperor Zaichun complied when Cixi told him to live apart from his bride.

_____

_____

_____

4. How did Cixi remain in power after her son died?

_____

_____

_____

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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