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Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
اَ	a		اَ، اِيَّ	an
اُ	u		اُو	un
اِ	i		اِي	in
اَ، اِ، اِيَّ	ā		اَو	aw
اُو	ū		اَي	ay
اِي	ī		اُو	uww, ū (in final position)
			اَي	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: <http://rotas.iium.edu.my>

Gender Issues and the Distorted Narrative in Women Leadership in China: The Case of Empress Dowager Cixi (1861-1908)

Muhamad Daniel Ibrahim Yaacob*

Siti Zuliha Razali**

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Abstract: Throughout history, the controversial Empress Dowager Cixi has been portrayed as a cruel and ineffective leader, despite contradicting evidences. This study assesses the narratives that vilified her via library and historical research methods, and analysed using critical discourse analysis. The Qing's social system became an instrument of prejudice and discrimination which fostered a gender-biased mindset and disparity that was used against Qing women like Cixi. This scenario paved the way for prejudiced and fabricated narratives about Cixi written by scholars and foes, and were accepted and cited in the vast majority of subsequent English historical and scholarly works, which are still regarded as accurate today. The study discovers that Cixi's contribution can be traced through China's political, development, and social sectors, such as in the empowerment of Qing women. This article examines Cixi under the theme of gender, and accentuated how gender has become a crucial key in creating a massive impact on her life and how Qing's societal system itself becomes a tool of suppression, bias and discrimination towards Qing women, specifically Cixi. This article bridges a major research gap in gender and political studies by filling in the studies on historical women's leadership. Cixi broke down gender barriers to reform China, and she should be honoured for her contributions to society.

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Keywords: Cixi; Confucianism; demonisation; patriarchy; women

Abstrak: Sisipan sejarah menggambarkan Maharani Cixi sebagai pemimpin kontroversi yang gagal dan kejam walaupun ada pembuktian yang menunjukkan sebaliknya. Justeru, artikel ini membincangkan naratifnya menerusi kaedah kajian sejarah dan keputakaan dan dianalisa menerusi metod analisis wacana kritikal. Sistem sosial Qing menjadi instrumen yang memupuk diskriminasi dan pemikiran prejudis terhadap wanita Qing seperti Cixi. Senario ini mejurus kepada kewujudan naratif berat sebelah dan terpesong yang dihasilkan oleh sarjana dan musuh Cixi sendiri terhadap dirinya dan kemudian dirujuk oleh kebanyakan penulisan sejarah dan akademik berbahasa Inggeris dan diterima sebagai fakta sehingga hari ini. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa sumbangan Cixi boleh dikesan menerusi sektor politik, pembangunan dan sosial China misalannya pemerkaasaan wanita. Kajian gender ini menumpukan pada bagaimana konsep gender itu memainkan peranan signifikan di dalam kepimpinan Cixi serta bagaimana kod sistem kebudayaan masyarakat patriarki Qing itu menjadi alat diskriminasi dan prejudisme terhadap wanita Qing terutamanya Cixi yang menjurus kepada pendemonisasiannya. Kajian ini berperanan mencerahkan pemahaman masyarakat awam dan akademik mengenai sumbangan Cixi serta memenuhi kelompangan kajian gender dan politik mengenai keterlepasan pandang kajian kepimpinan wanita. Cixi berjaya menafikan halangan gender untuk menjadi pemimpin yang mereformasi China dan sumbangannya patut diiktiraf.

Kata Kunci: Cixi; Demonisasi; Konfusianisme; Patriarki; Wanita

Introduction

Today, some countries such as China have attempted to distance themselves from aspects of gender inequality and discriminatory sociocultural context of their past by renouncing old patriarchal systems and reforming their societal structures and cultural practices. China's dynastic monarchical system was abolished after the overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911. This dynasty used Confucianism as its primary moral teachings, which were ingrained in the social framework (Wang, 2004). Qing society practiced a maximised form of patriarchal culture, whereby women were subjected to oppression and denigration. This was due to the reinforcement of the patriarchal rule, which aimed to prevent the return of women's sovereignty, given the historical ascendancy of Wu Zetian (623-705 CE). Ancient Chinese women were

subjected to more strictness and oppression. Besides being forbidden from participating in public affairs, they were relegated to only women-related responsibilities (Gao, 2003). These principles, which were ingrained in Qing culture and customs, established the patriarchal culture. According to Chang (2020), women were required to be obedient to men throughout their lifetimes, a principle that subjected them to exploitation and injustice. Notably, the lives of women were shaped to achieve the ideal characteristics of the patriarchal system and thus maintain the superiority of this gender-biased society which can be perceived as a form of hegemonic masculinity.

However, this hegemony was shattered by Empress Dowager Cixi as she rose to become the empress dowager which ruled as China's regent for 48 years until her death in 1908. She took over the Qing Empire when it was at its lowest point after losing two major wars. While other countries such as Japan advanced through rapid industrialisation, China regressed and deteriorated. Nevertheless, Cixi was able to reverse the tide and pushed China to join the wave of advancement. During her administration, various sectors (e.g., defence, economy, and education) improved, which helped to enhance the survivability of China (Chang, 2013).

Unfortunately, Cixi's life and her substantial contributions were overlooked in every possible narrative, such as that of Laidler (2003). Her leadership was questioned and she did not receive the credit she deserved for her contributions. The reasons why Cixi was stigmatised and denounced remain untapped due to the lack of contemporary research. Was she propelled down the path of demonisation by her political adversaries or by the bigotry and patriarchal attitudes prevalent at that time? This study challenges the existing negative perceptions of Cixi by highlighting her positive image, which has been ignored and maligned, as well as examining how gender-based norms contributed to the demonisation of women using critical discourse analysis to conduct the in-depth analysis for the arguments. We examine Cixi as the research subject using secondary sources through library and case study research to figure out and draw public attention to:

- 1) gender-biased notions that persisted across Qing's social structure

- 2) how Confucianism being misused as a tool to strengthen the patriarchal society
- 3) (hegemony of masculinity) the gender issues and factors which led to Cixi's demonisation
- 4) recognise the leadership of Cixi.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, we have adopted steps and criteria used by Kodak and Meyer (2009) for data collection and incorporated them with data triangulation which covers on:

- 1) specific discourse
- 2) specific period that connected to the issue and political or social actors
- 3) specific political units (state, international, region)

in which every data from past literature that is related to the study is collected through non-cherry-picking data procedure to create a transparent and non-biased analysis. This study encourages the public, especially scholars, to delve into Cixi's gender-influenced narratives to learn more about her value within gender scholarship. This study aims to highlight the importance of Chinese politics, women's leadership, and patriarchy in the contemporary setting. Despite the unique past, present, and future of each dynasty, they operated in their distinctive fashion, while their commonalities could be traced back to the country's underlying patriarchal social structure.

This study elaborates on how gender-biased notions persist in the social structure. To comprehend contemporary politics or find a means to modify or enhance the current status quo, one should look back into history. A thorough analysis of dynasties and gender may improve the status of contemporary women. Women today are still facing the same discrimination and demonisation, and despite improvements in contemporary politics, remnants of the past continue to linger, such as gender preference (Attane, 2012). With gender as the focus, this study examines the importance of historical women figures, particularly Cixi and draws attention to the neglected components that led to Cixi's demonisation. The aim is to enlighten gender scholars and the public about her demonised life and leadership. It is time for her to be acknowledged as one of the great women leaders of the past, in line with others such as Wu Zetian.

The Context of Cixi's Demonisation

Cixi has been viewed as a *femme fatale* and a failed leader in the historical narratives, which remains the current perspective in modern society. There has been a lack of significant favorable research or narratives concerning her accomplishments and role in modernising China and the Qing Empire during the late Qing dynasty. These topics have not been extensively cited or discussed. The focus has been more on the distorted and prejudiced narratives of her. This was largely due to how Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Backhouse (1873-1944) perceived Cixi in their writings. Backhouse's writing especially has been highly influential in creating the negative perception of her. Lo Hui-Min (1991) argued that Backhouse's writing was cited extensively by scholars. Seagrave (1993) has also argued that scholars choose to cite and favor Backhouse's writing while ignoring other works that were more favorable to Cixi (Schwegler, 2019). Some positive depictions of Cixi were produced by Cixi's own confidants, such as Yu Der Ling (1881-1944). Schwegler (2019) argued that a possible reason for this was that confidants like Yu Der Ling were simply not men and they wrote about Cixi in less critical ways. We view this action as a form of gender bias, whereby prejudice was involved in the making of Cixi's narratives, as well as the related academic research and writing, which has led to Cixi's leadership and life being negatively portrayed to this day.

Cixi was stigmatised by accusations that circulated during her era and in the majority of subsequent English-based historical narratives, which highlighted her as an ineffective ruler who brought about the collapse of the dynasty. Ong (2005) claimed that Cixi's leadership caused China terrible misfortune. Therefore, she alone was blamed for the collapse of the Qing dynasty, which led to the perception that she was a poor leader. She was blamed for the failure of Guangxu reformation plan due to the Wuxu Coup (1898), which created the idea that Cixi was anti-modernisation. Zhang (2010) argued that when Cixi retook the regency, she did little to ensure China's survivability and she passively adjusted policies due to external influence. She was held accountable for the end of the Qing dynasty, mainly because she failed to take the appropriate effective actions or preventive measures.

However, we discover that her leadership did prolong the dynasty from collapse. According to Chang (2013), Cixi took progressive steps

to re-implement the open-door policy that began the reformation of the country and the building of diplomatic ties with the West. Cixi managed to improve many sectors, including defense, the economy, and the social system. Some of her substantial contributions were the halting of the Taiping Rebellion, an enhanced military system, the clearance of Opium War debts, the installation of a telegraph system, and new forms of energy (e.g., coal mining). A popular custom was footbinding, which, according to Mann (2011), caused women excruciating pain in their feet in the name of beauty and marriage prospects, which worked as a tool for patriarchal control that reflects women's submission and oppression, was also abolished. Most importantly, Cixi also made her contribution to Qing women's empowerment through the education sector. For instance, she issued a decree entitled "The Regulation for Women's Education," which issued scholarships and enabled female students to pursue education abroad (Rhoads, 2000). One of the teenage girls to receive a scholarship was Song Qingling, the future wife of Sun Yat-Sen (President of the Republic of China). Her period also saw the production of magazines and journals which promoted women's liberation and life (Chang, 2013). Another example was *Nü xuebao* 女學報 (*Journal of Women's Education*), which was first published in 1898 (Barish, 2018). Even with the angst of, and rejection from, some officials due to the alleged potential threat to social stability posed by women's education and newly educated women, other officials saw these same women as potential frontline soldiers in the battle to define the nation (Barish, 2018). According to Judge (2001), officials like Rong-Qing and Zhan Zhidong were involved in drafting the documents on education for girls and proposed that family education should be taught within female education due to various concerns, as well as the arguments that it could impaired traditional values and that it was too early to establish formal education for girls and women. Nevertheless, Cixi decided to support this move to ensure Qing survivability (Chang, 2013).

We perceive her move as a step to reforming the Qing system while pushing for women's empowerment and life improvement, even if this contravened the societal culture at the time in which Qing women were restricted by *Nü sishu* 女四書 (*The Confucian Four Books for Women*) and household management. At the same time, the reform managed to break down the original Qing societal system, which differentiated the hereditary Manchu nobility caste from the Chinese civilian populations.

This led to Cixi being praised by certain Chinese writers and influential journalists, such as Diao Minqian, for promoting women's education and gender equality (Barish, 2018).

However, her contribution was neglected in most narratives. Although she had absolute power as regent to make final decisions, her officials received most of the credit (Wong, 1992). Cixi was branded as greedy, selfish, and a failed leader who opposed the reformation (Chang, 2013). According to McMahon (2020), Cixi was accused of leading the Qing dynasty into ruin when she failed to ensure improvements due to her luxurious lifestyle. *We perceive that her boldness shook the Qing patriarchal society and this, together with the distortion and extensive citation of negative narratives, has led to her demonisation.*

Gender-biased Cultures

This paper believes that Cixi's demonisation were caused by the Qing's gender-biased culture which promotes hegemonic masculinity. This resulted in the historical narratives that have tarnished her reputation and denied her role and contributions. Cixi's demonisation and lack of recognition can be regarded as a form of women's discrimination as Jiang (2009) suggested that women in ancient China neither had similar opportunities nor received the same recognition as men. The gender-biased society and one-sided narratives of that time led to her demonisation in the historical narratives (Chung, 1979). This article does not intend to dive deeply into Confucianism debates as our focus is Cixi's demonisation. However, we choose to include a small element of the Confucianism perspective to illustrate how this teaching itself was misused and manipulated as a form of justification by the Qing's patriarchal system to enable the oppression of Qing women such as Cixi. Clark and Wang (2004) argued that few scholars have deemed Confucianism to be the sole cause of Qing women's oppression. Scholars such as Fang (2021) contended that Confucianism contains the essence of gender biasedness that led to women's oppression.

Such essence that raised up, such as in Analects 17.23 (some version was on verse 17.25), as follows:

“子曰：「唯女子與小人為難養也，近之則不孫，遠之則怨。」”

Pang-White (2018) translated the verse as “only women and morally inferior men seem difficult to care for. If you keep them close, they become insubordinate; but if you keep them at a distance, they become resentful”.

Nevertheless, Clark and Wang (2004) argued that the establishment of this gender-biased culture was not fully instigated by Confucianism teaching, although some Confucianism ideas might imply this. This perception existed due to how Confucianism served as the guidelines with immense influence in Qing society and it was socio-historically and culturally conditioned, and pushed to suit the traditional gender hierarchies, in which the succeeding imperial culture increasingly promoted the idea of men being ontologically superior to women (Clark & Wang, 2004). We perceived this system itself where the men trying to uphold their dominance over women as the hegemony of masculinity, in which Hirsch & Kachtan (2018) stated that the hegemony can be seen through the dominant social status of men and subordinate social status of women, and in this study, can be traced through Qing’s men superiority and Qing’s women inferiority and oppression.

Jiang (2009) argued that the sexism in later Confucianism is an outgrowth of the sexism implicit in early Confucianism. However, Rosenlee (2012) argued that Confucianist literature such as Analects did discuss women but never suggested that men should dominate or oppress women adding that the gender roles and division during the early stages of Confucianism were meant to create a proper gender distinction that would differentiate the Han culture and barbarians. Confucianism might have made statements about gender perspectives, such as that of Analects 17.23, that are rationally questionable. Yet recent research has pointed out how Confucianism did not push for women’s oppression and men’s superiority. Clark and Wang (2004) added:

The history of Imperial China is littered with emperors and bureaucrats who abused their power under the name of Confucianism but who violated the Mandate of Heaven; these rulers were but legalists in Confucian clothing.

Chang (2020) stated that politicians such as Dong Zongshu, who was also an influential Confucian scholar, subscribed to a dualistic theory of Confucian ethics that defined the men as *Yang*; rulers, husbands, fathers, sons; and *Yin*; wives, daughters, daughters-in-law. Hence,

women were encouraged to follow men and be filial as part of the fundamental belief that filial piety was the basis for the deeply rooted law and customs of the Chinese people (Tang, 1995; Chang, 2020). This indicates how politicians/men themselves misused the teachings and promoted women's oppression. This shows how the teachings were interpreted and misused by politicians and the state for their own benefit, where those teachings were passed down through the generations until the Qing dynasty. Confucianism was misused by the societal system itself—for instance, family institutions, politicians, and rulers might take advantage of it and use it as a tool to justify women's denigration, demonisation, and denial of recognition or to explain any sort of negative treatment toward them.

Zhen He-Yin depicted how Qing society led to the establishment of problematic institutions that not only divided and isolated women and men but also empowered men (Liu, Karl, and Ko, 2013). The Qing societal system itself was the root of the biased and prejudiced society that discriminated against Qing women, regardless of their status. The patriarchal system enforced stringent norms to oppress and control women. One of the biased beliefs was that women were unsuitable for education as they could cause trouble (Ko, 1994). Female access to advanced education, such as classical reading and writing proficiencies, was prohibited, thus depriving them of their entitlement to a decent education that matched the ones enjoyed by Qing males. The hegemony of men was preserved through educational inequality and by denying women their rights to a better life and education. Nevertheless, women still received a basic education about women through *Nü sishu*, but *Nü sishu* was manipulated as an instrument to establish the gender role of women and the need for them to obey the men (Hinsch, 2022).

According to Pang-White (2018), *Nü sishu* teaches ideal female traits, such as how women should serve their parents-in-law, husbands, and get along with their brothers and sisters-in-law but *Nü sishu* did not condone women's oppression and blind subordination to men. However, certain virtues (e.g., *lǐ* and *xiào*) were misused in the name of Confucianism and become a restraint to women as they had to be loyal and filial to men. These Confucianist virtues gradually got infused with the law and culture, which turned into the base of a variety of legal and moral obligations (MacCormack, 2006). This paper contends that Qing women were oppressed and discriminated, the blame for which cannot

be placed on Confucianism but on the state and societal institutions that forced it through the patriarchal system and misused it to safeguard men's stakes and maintain control over women. This patriarchal system's problematic nature includes the acts of denial of proper education (only *Nü sishu*) footbinding, widow chastity, suicide, infanticide, and selling wives for prostitution (Mann, 1987; Huang, 2001). The upholding of such customs was a constraint that became a trap for women; if they crossed the line, they were not regarded as morally upright or decent. Women were not allowed to participate in general matters (men's affairs) as this was regarded as only likely to wreak havoc and result in catastrophe (Gao, 2000). Women were deemed as harmful figures whose participation in men's affairs could lead to disaster, demonstrating how they were restrained and discriminated against. Women's participation in administration was viewed as a sign of men's weakness and thus regarded as taboo. Women were the subjects of blame and held liable if a man overindulged them (Gao, 2003). They had to be obedient to men and their role was severely constrained, which signifies the discrimination and cruel treatment meted out to Qing women. The patriarchal system itself acted as a chain to women for which Mann (2021) commented that the tradition is an overt display that serves to protect the patriarchal system as well as a tool for social control and the subjugation of women.

Thus, in Cixi's case, even if she was a ruler, she was like any other Qing woman in being subjected to ethics and rules. She herself was ultimately regarded negatively and mistreated in numerous ways, such as the creation of the image of her as a *femme fatale* or an unruly non-ideal Qing woman. Schell and Delury (2013) described Cixi as Qing's last leader and a national *femme fatale* on a par with Wu Zetian. A *femme fatale*, according to Minowa, Maclaran, and Stevens (2019), refers to a seductress who disrupts the traditional ideals of femininity and the usage of such term exist in Sinology, which was *Gu*: 蛊 (Enchantment) and *Mei*: 媚 (Art of Charming). Zhang Hanmo (2013) presented an approach of using these terms interchangeably with *femme fatale* to express the same notion, hence the same approach was adopted in this article.

Laidler (2003) claimed that Cixi swayed Emperor Xianfeng using her sexual prowess and craft, thus amusing him so that she could become involved in court affairs, which helped her to rise in power. Cixi was seen in this light as she did not adhere to the ideal behaviour of the time, instead acting promiscuously and using men to gain power (Ku, 2021).

We believe that her being branded as a *femme fatale* is because scholars such as Laidler perceived that she displayed improper behaviour to seduce Xianfeng in order to gain power, given that she was permitted to assist Xianfeng in managing national affairs by reading the memoranda of officials and writing decrees or responses on the Emperor's behalf.

We contend that her involvement in assisting Xianfeng with state matters was due to her exceptional literacy skills, as Ku (2021) argued that her literacy proficiency earned her the opportunity to assist Xianfeng in this way. It was uncommon for Qing women to possess literacy skills due to the strict controls over their education. Since it was better for Qing women to stay illiterate, the presence of educated women was extremely rare. Cixi was misunderstood for seducing Xianfeng for reasons of power. She was blamed for Xianfeng's overfavouring of her, and her involvement in the national affair was deemed a taboo. This notion supports the remark by Gao (2003) about how Qing women were blamed for the indecent behavior of Qing men. The view that women should not be educated, talented, or involved in men's affairs is an additional indication that women were discriminated against. This demonstrates how a biased and prejudiced mentality contributed to the development of a negative perception. It also illustrates how the situation of the time, which adhered to patriarchal norms, suppressed the advancement of women's abilities and denied them the right to improve themselves.

Concerns have been expressed regarding Cixi's political role in comparison to Wu Zetian's role during the Tang Dynasty. The discriminatory phrase, "the calamity of Wu Zetian is again before us," was deployed by future dynasties as a warning about Wu Zetian's reign (McMahon, 2013). This informed subsequent monarchs about the alleged impacts of women on men's affairs. Cixi's role was perceived as blasphemous and equated to catastrophes as she was associated with the curse of the Yehenala clanswoman who would cause the ruin of the Qing dynasty (Wakeman, 1977). Chang (2013) explains that this particular notion was sensationalised in the historical narratives and was, in fact, invented. This paper argues that it was exaggerated to make it appear more plausible for Cixi to be responsible for the collapse of the dynasty. We discovered that discrimination played a role in Cixi's accreditation denial. Chang (2013) explained that in the majority of the English historical writings, Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909)

and Li Hongzhang (1823-1901) tend to be credited for their major roles in the transformation of China during Cixi's regency, and Cixi did not receive the same degree of recognition. McMahon (2020) argued that as a leader, Cixi oversaw and led the entire reformation process, and Wong (1992) stated that the reformation program could not have been introduced without Cixi's consent. Hence, this article stresses that this reformation could not have been achieved without Cixi's role, thus refuting the claim that she was an anti-reformist. Some writers, such as Barish (2018), have discussed her contributions, yet these aspects were not fully discussed in other majority historical narratives that have mentioned her. Jiang (2009) suggested that Chinese women had neither similar opportunities nor recognition to those of men which led to women being subjected to horrible treatment and unable to achieve the same degree of achievement as males. This happened to Cixi, where her role and contributions were neglected, and her negativity was amplified and exaggerated. The current authors contend that the gender-biased culture and prejudiced mindset led to Cixi's demonisation. It was easier for the society at the time to accept negative narratives and perceptions of wicked women due to prejudiced norms. The society and scholars of that time accepted the narratives of Cixi's misconduct because the perception of women as capable of causing destruction was instilled in the culture. These views have affected Cixi's narratives until today, which have led to recognition denial and the view that she was a villain.

The Distorted and Exaggerated Narrative

Distortion of the facts led to Cixi being demonised, signifying how distorted narratives could lead to women being vilified and treated negatively. One component that contributed to her demonisation was gender bias, whereby the narrative itself was recounted and concluded in a biased manner. These narratives have been cited and affected writing and perceptions about her until the present day. For example, the narratives by Backhouse and Kang substantially influenced the perception of Cixi in the subsequent narratives. Chung (1979) commented:

Scholars have been prejudiced against feminine influence in court, and they have been presented with a one-sided view and given undeserved credence to numerous myths and misconceptions about Cixi. Historians long relied upon the works of Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao

(1873-1929), for their information about the of the court during the period 1898 to 1900. Since these men opposed Cixi, their prejudice is reflected in their writings.

Kwong (2000) argued that Cixi was portrayed in such a negative way through Kang's writing that subsequent scholars came to regard the situation as one involving good versus evil and Kang as a victim of Cixi's power and greed and clearly impacted the subsequent academic writing flow as previous narratives were cited. This can be seen in the works of Hsu (2000) and Ong (2005), who viewed Cixi as a selfish woman who failed to regenerate and modernise the country while Kang was lauded as a reformer who wanted to save the country. Hence, this article examines Kang's involvement as one of those responsible for Cixi's demonisation. This article does not refute the contributions of Kang and his disciple Liang during Guangxu's administration, such as the founding of a Western-style university, Imperial University, which enhanced the education system to a new level (Wong, 1992). Although Kang made significant contributions, he was a highly ambitious man with his own political interests and a part of anti-dowager faction and conspirators in the anti-dowager scheme that spawned countless rumours about Cixi (Chung, 1979; Chang, 2013). Chang (2013) state that Kang had listed the charges against Cixi, such as initiating the 1898 Wuxu Coup, killing Tongzhi and Alute, as well as using naval funds to build the Summer Palace, which led to China losing the Sino-Japan war. The anti-dowager faction took advantage of any possible scenario to create a negative perception of Cixi so that she came to be portrayed as a failed leader (Jia, 2020).

Cixi's actions were exaggerated to imply that she was fully responsible and accountable for the country's demise. For example, the 1898 Wuxu Coup that Cixi launched was used as a propaganda tool to smear her reputation and label her a treacherous, anti-reform, and greedy leader. This was stated by Kang Youwei and his circle through their writings in newspapers such as *The China Discussion*, and this perception has lasted till the present day (Li & Harriet, 2012). Her participation in men's affairs demonstrated her acts of treason, disobedience, and disrespect toward cultural teaching as women were not allowed to get involved in men's affair. Upon participating in the Wuxu Coup, she returned to the regency after Guangxu's administration was replaced. Wong (1992) claimed that Cixi's coup functioned as an

attempt to protect her interests, and McMahon (2020) asserted that Cixi felt that the Guangxu reforms would imperil her interests and authority. Wong added that Cixi did not oppose reform because it was with her agreement that edicts could be issued, but she felt obligated to intercede due to Kang's potential to mislead Guangxu and a concealed conspiracy to murder her. Chang (2013) noted that the reason for her comeback was government corruption and, as regent, she continued the reform process. Nonetheless, Wong (1992) stated that Kang used her coup to demonise her as a treacherous dowager and to claim that she defied the idea of filial piety to the Emperor to become regent again (Jia, 2020). This corresponded to the idea that Cixi was also perceived as a *femme fatale* as she had committed a taboo against the Emperor. While striving to protect her interests, it was equally important to emphasise that she was defending herself against an antagonist who aimed to destroy her. However, this was unimportant at the time because she was viewed as immoral for committing treason against the Emperor. Nevertheless, we have to clarify that we do not reject the possibility that Cixi still wanted to hold onto power despite her retirement.

The analysis and narratives by Kang were easily accepted, indicating bias in the writing and how most writings relied on the view of a single party. Similarly, Chung (1979) stated that Western writers had drawn their facts from the writings of radical reformers and highly biased newspapers, such as the *North China Herald* and *Ch'ing-i pao*, which were personally edited by Liang. Wong recounted the argument that many scholars relied on the writings of reformers such as Kang:

Scholars have uncritically adopted Kang's analysis of his own role in 1898. Kwong gathers examples of the pro-reform or pro-revolution bias of modern historians and suggests that it tends to favour a large role of Kang. It is also true that many of the sources drawn on by conventional interpretations come from Kang and his friends. (Kwong 1984; Wong 1992).

The other narrative that has continued until today was that Cixi murdered her son, Tongzhi Emperor, and daughter-in-law, Empress Jiashun; this idea was created by Kang's faction to smear her (Jia, 2020). Library research shows that the majority of academic writings have cited false narratives and portrayed her negatively. McMahon (2020) stated that some versions mentioned how Jiashun had killed herself to prove her

devotion to Tongzhi, while others claimed that Cixi compelled her. One rumour was that Jiashun lost the power struggle to Cixi but, if Jiashun had lived, she would have become the new dowager, thus weakening Cixi's dominance. Cixi was blamed for the death of Jiashun Tongzhi. Ferla (2021) stated that Cixi neglected Tongzhi and Jiashun, which caused their illness and death. This paper depicts how this perception was exaggerated to demonise her, which was refuted by Yu (2015), who said that Cixi loved her son Tongzhi and stated that the murder accusations were a lie. Her reputation has suffered throughout history due to the biased and misleading accounts written about her, some penned by Kang. The story narrated by Kang was widely accepted, primarily because he was viewed as a reformer who wished to preserve China, despite being an ambitious and powerful man who eliminated anyone who did not align with him, such as his removal of his patron, Weng Tonghe (Wong, 1992). We perceive that the same methods were deployed against Cixi when Kang used propaganda and narratives to damage Cixi's image. He used all means and opportunities to destroy Cixi's reputation, and the narratives were widely received because they originated from a reformer who became a political victim to a conservative leader. This smear campaign that led to her demonisation has lasted throughout the previous century, indicating how badly her reputation and leadership have suffered from the political clash between Kang and herself.

Scholars such as Ong (2005) claimed that she was a failed leader and that the downfall of the Qing was due to her lavish lifestyle and greedy behaviour. Spence (1982) stated that Cixi was criticised for wasting money to rebuild the Summer Palace using funds that were allocated for the development of the military system, and Ong (2005) further elaborated how this, in turn, caused China's defeat in the Sino-Japan War. Along the lines directed at Cixi about her misuse of funds for her personal purposes, Chang (2013) commented:

Some of the funds came from her own. The navy was allocated a colossal fund each year, which was deposited in a foreign bank. Exactly how much she took is unclear. In just under a decade, she may have siphoned off enough amounts that tally the overall cost of the building works. This money did not come from the capital of the naval funds deposited in the bank, and Chinese scholars have concluded that the arrangement did not significantly impact the navy.

This article does not deny the possibility of her misuse of the funds, even if some writings claimed that the money did not come from these sources. Even if misuse of funds occurred, this did not exert a significant impact on the defense system, which has been exaggerated in some writings. As a political figure, Cixi might have misused her position for her own interests, but we contend that the issue was amplified to demonise her reputation. For example, her role and contributions were misinterpreted to highlight her negatively, and it is unfair to blame her for the dynasty's downfall as she had played a significant role in advancing and modernising the country. McMahon (2020) claimed that people vilified her and accused her of living an extravagant life in dire times, but it is unfair to blame her alone.

Narrative distortion was also noted in the work by Backhouse, which pioneered the majority of past and present academic studies. We perceive this as the mold for the contemporary perception of Cixi. Hugh Trevor-Roper (1978) refuted Sir Backhouse's literature, such as his views on China under the Empress Dowager, and dismissed *Décadence Mandchoue* as sheer fiction, fraud, and imagination. In *Décadence Mandchoue*, Backhouse claimed to be Cixi's favorite sexual companion (Backhouse, 2011). Backhouse claimed that his book about China under the Empress Dowager was based on a journal by a Qing official that he had found (Bland & Backhouse, 2009). However, Trevor-Roper (1978) outlined the heinous crimes and slanders perpetrated against Cixi by Backhouse, who forged the journal he claimed had belonged to a Chinese aristocrat and which he used as his primary literary source. In a similar vein, Lo Hui-Min's (1991) article included the copied primary source of ChingShan's diary, which Backhouse had primarily used and asserted to be authentic but which was then debunked by Hui-Min as a forgery. Backhouse's writing was referenced for decades as truth, which tarnished Cixi's image. Seagrave (1993) criticised Backhouse for exploiting hoaxes and fraudulent references in his books and for destroying sinology as a whole. The work of Backhouse is one of the tools used to attack and discredit Cixi. Backhouse is an example of a scholar prejudiced against women, particularly those who were powerful and assertive. Such scholars would not question the sources or facts in the story. It is easy for these women to be targeted when hearsay, gossip, or criticism circulates about their actions or behaviours. Backhouse's fabrication and narrative distortion revealed how biased a

scholar could be when writing about women. Prejudice and sexism are unquestionably present in historical documents when written by people such as Backhouse. The patriarchal standard of the period showcased women as a scourge and as destructive instruments, whereby societies readily accepted stories about them. Cixi was demonised in the last century due to viral defamation based on prejudice and bias.

Conclusion

Most English-language depictions of Cixi portray her as a wicked leader who failed to prolong China's survival. Most of these narratives referred to the works by Backhouse and Kang as their guides until they were discredited as forgery and narrative distortion. Almost no in-depth studies of Cixi's demonisation exist because most studies including Chang's (2013) book concentrated on her biography. The relevant questions are why she was demonised, as well as why her role and contributions were left unrecognised in the historical narratives. This paper bridges these gaps and offers explanations by analysing the central feature – gender. This paper has thoroughly examined how gender differences emerged as a crucial factor that contributed to the distortion of the narratives of Cixi. This article expands on the issue faced by Qing women such as Cixi, particularly in terms of how patriarchal rules resulted in women's subordination and discrimination at all levels of the social hierarchy. We strive not to mimic past work, such as Brent Hinsch's "Women in Imperial China" (2016), in which Lin (2019) elaborated Hinsch's argument about how ancient Chinese women constructed their identities and positions. This short account of women's challenges helped to establish the content flow and enable a better understanding of the factors that led to her demonisation. This study does not deny that Cixi was a political actor who took the initiative to preserve her dominance in China's politics. Nevertheless, she was a remarkable political figure who substantially contributed to her country. Cixi revived China when it was on the brink of ruin after losing two Opium Wars. We do not deny that her officials deserve recognition for their achievements. However, Cixi also deserves to be recognised and celebrated for her role and contributions, which have been largely overlooked in the English-language narratives. Cixi's demonisation was related to gender-related factors such as the prejudiced mindset, discrimination, and patriarchal notion in Qing culture. This promoted the superiority of men over women, thus limiting women's freedom,

forcing them to defer to male authority, and denying their opportunities and rightful recognition for their work and contribution.

The purpose of this article is to bring greater attention to Cixi as a figure who played an important role in the history of China. The study of Cixi has enabled us to comprehend how gender studies in the context of sinology have evolved. This study has resketched the perception of Cixi's narrative, which had previously been told from a biased perspective. According to Teng (1996), the gender sinology scholars sought authoritative sources of ideology that resulted in an elite-focused bias in the literature. Some terminologies, such as *femme fatale*, were viewed as foreign in the context of sinology gender studies but served to illustrate the background of our argument, which we hope will help the reader to better understand the demonisation of Cixi. Examining various works such as Pang-White (2018), has newly exposed how Confucianism is not sexist or discriminating toward women, yet it was misused for discriminating purposes that denigrate women and championing the men. This in return paired with the gender card led to the outcome that implicated Cixi's leadership throughout history which ultimately led her to be painted in such negative ways and being disregarded as an important historical agent during the transformation of late Qing period due to the biased creation of narratives. Even with the latest contemporary research such as Barish (2019) celebrating her contribution, her leadership records were still scrutinised and she did not receive proper accreditation. This paper presents a thorough discussion of the conditions that led to Cixi's demonisation and accreditation denial, as well as how she was a victim of the oppressive patriarchal system itself, thus revealing the immense impact of gender on society. To quote Li and Harriet (2012), it is now time to consider Cixi about her place in Qing history.

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Chapter in a Book

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Alias (2009)

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Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

Journal Article

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Chapra (2002)

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Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 10, 214-232.

The Qur'ān

In-text:

(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36

(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:

The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth

In-text:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)

(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:

(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.

(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible

In-text:

Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:

The new Oxford annotated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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