

## Historical Revisionism in Anchee Min's *Empress Orchid*

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### Abstract

Revisionism describes the process of critically reviewing established theories and suggesting amendments. Historical revisionism allows past events to be reviewed in an objective and non-biased manner and revisionism is also important for maintaining the accuracy of human knowledge. This is usually done by academicians and historians who are eager to learn the actual chain of events from the past. Historic revisionism is a practice in historiography in which a historian reinterprets traditional views of causes and effects, decisions, and evidence. It is said that history is always written by the winners. Empress Dowager Cixi is commonly blamed as the main cause of the fall of Chinese dynastic rule early in the twentieth century. The historical narrative consistently states that Cixi's thirst for power, backwardness, and conservative values inevitably meant she was unable to make necessary reform. Over the last century and a half an amazing number of biographical books and articles have been written about the Empress Dowager Cixi. Born in Shanghai Anchee Min's writing has been praised for its raw, sharp language and historical accuracy and she has published two memoirs, *Red Azalea* and *The Cooked Seed* and has written six subsequent works of historical fiction. Anchee Min being a Chinese American writer Portrayed Empress Dowager Cixi in optimistic way through her novel *Empress Orchid*. Min Presents Orchid as a strong-willed, utterly compelling woman who used her beauty to become a concubine of the Emperor and her brains to become his confidante and lover. This research paper aims to explore the Historical Revisionism in Anchee Min's *Empress Orchid*.

**Key Words:** Revisionism, Opportunity, Documents, and Historians

### INTRODUCTION

Revisionism describes the process of critically reviewing established theories and suggesting amendments. It comes into play when newer findings contradict older theories, or when a mistake is discovered in the previously held explanations during re-examination. . Revisionism is important for maintaining the accuracy of human knowledge. It has always been known that, history is written by the one who is

victorious. However, the victor's version is often biased, and the facts are usually exaggerated in his favor. With the passage of time, as the true sequence of events are forgotten, this biased version of history is all that remains, and when it starts to be accepted as actual history, the entire system gets tainted.

Historical revisionism allows past events to be reviewed in an objective and non-biased manner. This is usually done by

academicians and historians who are eager to learn the actual chain of events from the past. With the help of authentic documents, proven facts, and other supportive pieces of evidence, they are able to critically examine historical theories. Once enough evidence on specific histories has been gathered, respective amendments are suggested, and are put up for review by recognized historians and other authorities. If these changes are approved, they become part of the accepted history, and are no longer considered to revisionists.

When we speak of historical revisionism we have to step very cautiously, as the academic world is one thing and the use that, at times, the falsification and the openly party political use of the past can take on in the political debate is another. In fact the word revisionist became fashionable at the end of the 19th century as an insult used by Lenin (1870-1924), when calling the socialist reformer Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932) a traitor. He had distanced himself from the master Karl Marx (1818-1883) by considering changing Marxist theory in the light of the latest tendencies in Western capitalist society, and thus theorizing about the usefulness of the reformist path over the revolutionary, who's high point came after 1917.

## DISCUSSION

Anchee Min's writing has been praised for its raw, sharp language and historical accuracy. She was born in Shanghai in January 14, 1957 during the rule of communist leader Mao Zedong. Anchee Min experienced political turmoil from an early age. She was chosen to become a leader of the Little Red Guards, a group of elementary

school children who supported and believed in Mao's ideas and underwent a wrenching introduction to political survival when she was forced to denounce her favorite teacher as a Western spy. Like every child of her generation, Min was taught to write Long Live Chairman Mao! Before she was taught to write her own name. She believed in Mao and Communism. Being a Chinese-American writer Anchee Min has published two memoirs, *Red Azalea*(1993) and *The Cooked Seed*(2013) and has written six subsequent works of historical fiction: *Katherine*(1995), *Becoming Madame Mao*(2000), *Wild Ginger*(2002), *Empress Orchid*(2003), *The Last Empress*(2007), and *Pearl of China*(2010).

People Republic of China- born authors who focus on China as the thematic center of their writing bring a new dimension to our reading of Chinese American literature. In particular, this focus moves critical consideration away from the cultural politics of national belonging that we have come to expect as a normative feature of this literature. While the focus on China enables Ha Jin and Anchee Min to highlight the suffering brought about by Communist rule, it also prompts comparison between conditions of social life in the People Republic of China and the United States. Almost most of the books of Anchee Min is revision of Chinese history, after migrating to America, she found most of the Chinese histories are corrupt and it is male centered where female's part is neglected.

The novel *Empress Orchid* voices with story of China's true Last Empress (Empress Dowager Cixi), starting from her adolescent age, just before she became a concubine to the Emperor, until the death of the Emperor

when she was about 30 years old. The novel opens with the scene of poverty, Orchid though her father had a decent government officer post, her life became a battle field and her social condition goes extremely down after he father's death. She left with no money for her father's burial. Family burden falls on her when her father dies though she is a young girl because she is the oldest one among her siblings.

Orchid's mother had spent essentially all of the family's money to transport her deceased husband's body back to the land in which he was born for the burial ceremony. It was upon being required to live with a distant uncle when Orchid understood she had to do something to save her family from living on the streets or worse being forced to marrying her opium-addicted cousin- Ping or Bottle, as he was better known. While she worked at a store that specialized in the manufacturing and repairing of wealthy Manchu women's shoes; which was owned by a middle- aged woman known as Big Sister Fann, she came to look up to this woman for advice and guidance. At first glance, Big Sister Fann does not see the beauty hidden under the peasant attire that Orchid has been reduced to, but when Orchid enters the Emperor search for his Imperial wives and has passed the first inspection Fann's opinion changes.

Big Sister Fann becomes one of Orchids closes allies in her first quest in the beginning of the new life she hopes to bring to her family. When it is advertised that China's young Emperor Hsien Feng is looking for future consorts, Orchid sees it as her chance to escape her arranged marriage. As she is a Manchu and the daughter of an officer, Orchid qualifies for the selection of

imperial consorts. With the assistance of Big Sister Fann, Orchid successfully passes all of the inspections putting her in the running to become the one of the Emperor's 200 concubines. Her life seems to be going a lot better when she is selected as one of the seven imperial wives; she is ranked fourth. Emperor Hsieng Feng bestows the title of Lady of the Greatest Virtue and grants her the Palace of Benevolent Tranquility as her living quarters though she has to compete with the beautiful Empress Nuharoo, and five other concubines.

After entering Forbidden City, Orchid befriends a eunuch called An-te-hai, who is allotted as her servant along with several other eunuchs and maids. A friendship started between the two, and she appoints him as her first attendant. As the months pass, Orchid becomes more desperate. The official duty of an Imperial consort is to sleep with the Emperor and produce male heirs, but Orchid has yet to be summoned. Without completing that duty, an Imperial consort risks being unacknowledged for the remainder of her life. Knowing this, Orchid decides to bribe Chief Eunuch Shim in order to gain Emperor Hsien Feng's attention. Her tactic works and she soon becomes the Emperor's favourite consort. During her time as the favourite, Orchid learns more about the current history of China, and the inner workings of the Forbidden City. Looking at history we see that women has always been influential and successful but since the society was male-oriented and extremely jealous of women being successful, we do not have any records of successful women as we do of men. But this particular novel breaks all stereotypes and presented women as a successful figure.

Historic revisionism is a practice in historiography in which a historian reinterprets traditional views of causes and effects, decisions, and evidence. It is said that “history is always written by the winners” (Brown 256). Thus, it is essential that we look at history with a critical eye. Much of historical revisionism is the re-examination of historical periods and events from the point of view of a specific group, like women, blacks, Native Americans, the working class, etc. Examples of revisionist history are *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1995) by Professor James Loewen and Kirkpatrick Sale’s *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian legacy* (1990).

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen criticizes modern American high school history textbooks for containing incorrect information about people and events such as Christopher Columbus, the lies and inaccuracies in the history books regarding the dealings between the Europeans and the Native Americans, and their often deceptive and inaccurate teachings told about America's commerce in slavery. He further criticizes the texts for a tendency to avoid controversy and for their "bland" and simplistic style. He proposes that when American history textbooks elevate American historical figures to the status of heroes, they unintentionally give students the impression that these figures are super humans who live in the irretrievable past. In other words, the history-as-myth method teaches students that America's greatest days have already passed. *In Lies my Teacher Told Me* Loewen revives history, restoring the vitality and relevance it truly possesses and this book serves as an accessible guide

to understand the prejudices over American history and also the process of revisionism.

*The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian legacy* also comes under revisionist history. In this book Sale destroys the heroic image that earlier writers have transmitted to us. Mr. Sale makes Columbus out to be cruel, greedy and incompetent (even as a sailor), and a man who was perversely intent on abusing the natural paradise on which he intruded.

On the other hand, today we take to be revisionist all the interpretations that, whether coming from university chairs or cultural pundits, try to dismantle the “truths”, at times mythologized, of traditional historiography. Even so, it should be said that in the universities all the historical views that try to question some of the crucial developments in modern and contemporary history are also understood as revisionism—from the French Revolution (1789-1799) to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), from communism to fascism and Nazism, and even the Holocaust—with the idea of reinterpreting certain historical events in the light of new facts, elements, and from a scientifically neutral perspective. According to the guidelines codified by Marc Bloch (1886-1944)—the French historian who founded the Annales school and who was shot by the Nazis—in his *Apologie pour l'historien ou le métier d'historien*, the historian’s job is characterised by the quest for multiple and diverse sources in order to achieve a broader view with respect to traditional political history. Bloch also argues that the professional historian’s duty is to understand the past and not to judge it, making clear the importance of cooling ideological or

political dogmatism (*The Historian's craft* 162). In this way, then, revisionism acquires a neutral valence and can even be considered a fundamental element that should define the deontological ethics of the historian.

James McPherson (2003), former president of the American Historical Association, stated that there is no single, eternal, and immutable truth about past events and their meaning. The unending quest of historians for understanding the past--that is revisionism--is what makes history vital and meaningful. Viewed in this light, revisionism is not an attack on classical interpretations of history, but rather a natural evolution of constantly unfolding interpretations of our past.

In history, children learn that the collapse of every dynasty was the fault of the concubine. The execution of the concubine justified whatever was wrong. That has been the tradition. In China Children are taught that the Empress was responsible for destroying China's two-thousand-year imperial culture. Chinese and Western history books portray her negatively too.

Anchee Min's version of Empress Dowager Cixi unfolds the hidden truth of the Last Empress of the Qing era and she highlights the actual events for the fall of Qing era. Many versions of history had been released by male historians but almost all history portrayed Empress Dowager Cixi as evil character. Out of the blue Min portrayed Cixi's role in optimistic view. I have read other versions of Cixi's history, but my views have changed when I read Min's version. Min narrated the novel in first person point of view which adds vibrant

effects to the story. By comparing other versions, Min's version of Empress Dowager Cixi appears realistic history and this encouraged me to place Min's *Empress Orchid* under revisionist history.

The interview, "Writers on the Air: Conversations about Books", took place in a Chicago-based radio show Open Books in April, 2004. In this interview Min revealed that:

she was not free to travel in China and conduct research. She was denied public library entrance because of her status. The government was very sensitive to any negative description of China, to the extent that her books were banned in China. She knew which door to knock on, who to bribe and so she had direct access to materials in the Forbidden City. Min's novel stood apart because she provided original work by referring the actual documents of the Forbidden City.

In this novel Min challenges the male historians by showing the story through Orchid's eye. Min covers the story from Orchid's childhood to the moment where she gains power. Orchid is forced to see reality that the court is a dangerous place. She is lonely and often depressed. She feels that her life will not improve. Eventually, she is forced to make sacrifices. She is also a woman who craves love and affection. When her husband, the emperor, is full of stress over the country's affairs, Orchid becomes interested in politics and helps him with court affairs because she loves him and wants to see him happy. Orchid is also a loving mother. She is strict with her child

because she wants him to be a good ruler. Throughout Orchid's journey, I loved watching her grow into a strong, mature, and intelligent woman. She is a woman who is devoted entirely to her country, and she fights for China to be grand again.

Min similarly gave importance to the lives of eunuchs. Instead of exploring the lives of concubine alone, she provided the thorough history of eunuchs and briefly expounds upon what it means to be a castrated male living in a word populated by thousands of female concubines.

Anchee Min ensures a great job portraying how that tradition becomes China's undoing, but how it is necessary to give hope to the people. It is the distance that the wealth creates that gives the peasants, whose lives are pretty miserable during this time period, something to look up to, he emphasized that I was not to express my feelings. I must not remind people that I was as ordinary as they were. But, being lived outside the Forbidden City she knows the real suffering of peasants unlike Emperor. She often emphasized their situation. Life for Orchid had become like the Peking operas she so dearly loves. This sort of stubborn tenacity to cling to customs is persistent throughout the whole novel. When Orchid is advising her sister about the pain of a loveless marriage, she replies, "If it is the way things have been for hundreds of years, I don't see why I should be the one to have problems." (Empress *Orchid* 218)

Orchid often sees life as an important opportunity, where she needs to prove herself if she has survive. She never had a thought of fleeing from her responsibility. Emperor Hsein Feng's character contrasts

with her, one is passionate and other shows involvement in escapism.

I won't last long, Orchid, I am sure, (153)

Emperor said these words with his eyes fixing on ceiling, it indicates he nearly lost faith in his rule. Feng was weak and defenseless, British took advantage of the situation and got signed the documents from Emperor to open Ports for selling Opium. But orchid even then continued to be optimistic, Emperor even allowed Orchid to read the court document which is forbidden for concubine to look. Orchid made use of every opportunity to have broaden view about China, in her mind she always remembers her father's line when he got removed from his post,

Dying is cheap and living is noble (153)

This made her look life as a onetime opportunity if we want to live we have to be cautious in each step, otherwise will get killed.

China was already in the decline before Orchid had even entered the palace. She was blamed for a lot of things that had already been taking place before her reign. Min provided several historical facts to prove this statement in the novel. Majorly Manchu officials had become lazy and corrupt because of their privilege, and corruption was unattended to. There was a lot of problems with policy, had civil unrest, invasions, widespread famine, infamous Opium Wars part one and two and of course, China, believing themselves to be invincible due to being favored by God, didn't feel the need to strengthen their armies. Min also explores the suffering of the concubines, as soon as they entered the Forbidden City set norms have narrated to them and they have

to behave accordingly. Their major duty is to sleep with the Emperor and produce a male heir, if the Emperor didn't favour them, they have to spend their remaining lives inside the Forbidden City accompanied with isolation. They are not permitted to remarry, which indicates the end of their lifecycle.

### CONCLUSION

This revisionist history book offers an in-depth psyche into one of China's most powerful and controversial figures. Orchid is a strong and complex woman who is forced to make hard decisions and sacrifices for the good of the nation. This novel is filled with

court intrigue, suspense, and romance. Min also shown China as a country that truly perceived itself as far superior to others in every way, and considered the rest of the world to be barbarians in comparison. The mistrust and lack of diplomatic success of China is far more understandable in this context. *Empress Orchid* is a further, feminist step on the road to her rehabilitation, written by a woman, narrated by Orchid herself, the novel turns the last Empress into a dignified, discreet sovereign, holding her country together in the face of foreign invasion, dissolute Emperors and scheming courtier.

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