

History

The Last Emperor

1 China was filled with unhappiness. Its population had grown so quickly that the country couldn't raise enough food to feed itself. China's factories, farming machines, and weapons were all old-fashioned and shabby. China could no longer defend itself; instead, other countries fought wars over its cities. Forty million Chinese used the drug opium.

Worst of all, the Qing dynasty seemed to have no power at all. After the Boxer Rebellion, China had been forced to do whatever the British and French ordered. When Russia and Japan fought over Chinese land, the United States had to step in to make peace. One Chinese official exclaimed, "The Russians are spying on us from the north, the English are peeking at us from the west, the French are glaring at us from the south, and the Japanese stare at us from the east. We are in great danger!"

The last Qing emperor could do nothing to protect his country from this danger. He was only three years old.

2 **What was China facing after the Boxer Rebellion?**

3 **Why couldn't the emperor do something about it?**

4 The empress Cixi had died in 1908. Guangxu, the emperor that the Dragon Empress had removed from his throne, was still alive—but he died not long after. It was rumored in the palace that Cixi had left instructions for Guangxu to be poisoned, so that her chosen heir, the three-year-old Qing prince Puyi, would have no rival for his throne.

5 At three, Puyi couldn't rule China. Instead, he lived in his palace inside the Forbidden City. Walls thirty-five feet high separated him from the common people of China. The roof of his palace was gold, the royal color. His blankets, dishes, clothes, and everything else he owned was also the color of gold.

What happened to Guangxu?

6 Until he was seven years old, Puyi never even saw another child. Scores of servants followed him everywhere, carrying extra clothing in case he got cold or wanted to change, and food in case he got hungry. At each meal, he was given twenty-five different kinds of food, laid out on six tables, to choose from. A doctor, carrying medicines, followed him around in case he sneezed or coughed.

7 Puyi was treated like a little god, but the real rulers of China were his regents. These Qing noblemen were supposed to run China for Puyi. The truth was that the regents, like the empress who had just died, had to do whatever Russia, Japan, and the United States told them to do.

Who were the real rulers of China?

8 In 1911, the people of China finally rebelled against this foreign control.

The revolt began in the Sichuan Province, near China's center. Officials in the Sichuan Province wanted to build their own railroad—a railroad that would belong to the Chinese, not to a foreign country like Russia. Many Sichuan merchants had contributed money to build the railroad. But they hadn't raised quite enough money to start laying down the railroad ties.

Then the Qing regents announced that the government would take over the project of building the railroad.

This meant that the Sichuan railroad would no longer belong to China. To finish the railroad, the Qing government meant to make a deal with French, German, and English bankers to get enough money. So the railroad would actually belong to French, German, and English banks.

9 **What did the Sichuan Province want to build?**

10 **What did the Chinese government want to do?**

11 **Why did the people have a problem with that?**

12 The Sichuan officials refused to hand over the railroad project. They announced that they would no longer obey the Qing regents or the Qing government. Instead, they would set up a new Chinese government—a Chinese republic. The capital of this new Chinese republic would be the city of Nanjing, far south of Beijing. The president of the republic would be a doctor named Sun Yixian.

13 **What did the Sichuan officials do?**

14 Sun Yixian (also called Sun Yat-sen) had tried to lead a rebellion against the Qing dynasty in 1895, sixteen years before. When his plans to overthrow the Qing ruler were discovered, Sun Yixian had to run for his life. He went to Japan, and afterwards travelled in Europe. But now he had returned to China as the head of a group of revolutionaries who called themselves the “Kuomintang,” or the “Nationalist Party.”

15 **What happened last time when Sun Yixian tried to lead a rebellion?**

16 The Sichuan rebellion spread all over China. The Qing regents knew that they could not fight against the will of the people, or against the armed members of the Nationalist Party. So in February of 1912, they announced that the little emperor would *abdicate* (leave his throne).

The Qing dynasty had ended. For the first time in thousands of years, China no longer had an emperor.

17 **What does abdicate mean?**

18 Now, Sun Yixian governed China. He told the Chinese people that, rather than following the rule of an emperor, they should live by the Three Principles of the People. The First Principle was “democracy”: The Chinese should be able to vote for their leaders. The Second Principle was “livelihood”: Everyone in China should be able to find a job and earn enough to buy food. And the Third Principle was “nationalism”: The Chinese, not foreigners, should run the country of China.

The little prince, barely eight years old, was allowed to keep on living in his palace. A British official visited him to give him English lessons. Puyi liked his English lessons, and asked his tutor whether he could have an English name. The tutor gave him a list of English kings. From this list, Puyi chose the name Henry. From then on, he was known as Henry Puyi.

19 **What happened to Emperor Puyi?**

20 When he was twenty years old, Henry Puyi finally left the Forbidden City, and Beijing, and his country. He went to live in Japan. The Forbidden Palace, which for so long had been closed to the common people of China, was opened up so that anyone could come and see it.

When he was fifty-two years old, Henry Puyi visited his home again—for the first time in thirty-two years. Few people noticed him, or knew who he was. Just like a tourist, he wandered through the palace where, so many years before, he had been treated like a god.

21 **What happened to the Forbidden Palace?**

I remember:

