

**Volume 6**

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**Dowager Empress Tzu-Hsi - II**

**Lead: Always reluctant to surrender power, Tzu-Hsi, Empress Dowager of China, the mother of Emperor Kuang-Hsu, in 1898 led a palace coup to defeat attempts at reform and modernization.**

**Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.**

**Content: In 1852 Tzu-Hsi, a delivered his only son to the emperor of China. At the old man's death in 1861 the widow assumed control of the nation as regent. When her son died 15 years later, quite possibly by**

**her order, she installed her nephew as emperor and continued to rule behind the scenes. This was a ruthless and intimidating woman who had under her spell the young emperor his court who lived behind the walls of the Forbidden City that secret royal enclave in heart of Beijing.**

**In 1889 Tzu-Hsi took up residence in the summer palace just outside the City where she supposedly entered retirement. Freed from his Aunt's formidable personality he fell under the influence of a group of reformers. After its shocking defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 brought Chinese backwardness into bold relief, the emperor and his advisors**

**instituted a series of reforms designed to modernize and Westernize China's undeveloped society. This seemed to threaten Tzu-Hsi and, rallying conservative mandarins, she stormed back into the Forbidden City in a fury, cowed the emperor who had flung himself at her feet when she smacked him with her fan. The most offensive reformers were beheaded or strangled and the Empress assumed control of affairs. She retained power until her death in 1908 by an artful manipulation of various power groups earning the reputation as a cunning and vicious ruler. The Dragon Lady's reassertion of power probably doomed hopes for a modernized China and made**

**inevitable a century or more of  
revolution.**

**At the University of Richmond,  
this is Dan Roberts.**

### **Resources**

**Cavendish, Richard. “Empress Tzu-  
Hsi’s Coup,” *History Today* 48 (9,  
September 1998):30.**

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