

CHAPTER ONE



No joy shall be equal ...

When the Emperor Hsien Feng turned over a jade plaque on the ivory table next to his chamber the fate of the last Dynasty to rule the Middle Kingdom was changed irrecoverably in a single action. The plaque bore the name of a young concubine from his harem and indicated that she was to be his bed-companion for the evening. That night, as was the custom, covered only by a red silk sheet, the girl was carried on the back of a eunuch to the Emperor's stone-flagged room and laid naked at the foot of his bed, up which she had to crawl to the Lord of Ten Thousand Years, so symbolising her complete subjection to the will of the Celestial Prince.

The girl who was to become the Last Empress of China, was known to the Manchu as Yehonala, from her clan name, the Yeho-Nala. She was just sixteen when she was chosen as a concubine for the Emperor Hsien Feng's harem, and forced to leave her family home and her betrothed forever. But entrance to the Emperor's seraglio did not guarantee time with the Celestial Prince – his harem was well-stocked with beautiful women chosen from across the Empire and Yehonala was to languish there for five long years before she was summoned to the Imperial bedchamber. But once she had been brought to the Emperor's couch, she stayed and no one could usurp her place as the Imperial bed-partner. The Emperor was utterly besotted with his 'new' concubine and remained so almost until his death. He simply could not do without her.

No one can be certain of what passed between the Emperor Hsien Feng and Yehonala during that first night they spent together. But whatever occurred it can only have pleased the

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Emperor, for it left an indelible impression upon him and set a seed that would finally bear fruit fifty years later in the collapse of a system that had governed China for over two millennia. Perhaps the essence of that meeting is best summed up in the words of the Chinese poet, Chang Heng, who almost two thousand years before had written of a wife's desire:

(So that) ... we can practise all the variegated postures,
Those that an ordinary husband has but rarely seen,
Such as taught by T'ien lao to the Yellow Emperor,
No joy shall be equal to the delights of this first night,
These shall never be forgotten, however old we may grow.
Chang Heng (AD 78–139)¹

While Yehonala was undoubtedly beautiful, she was not exceptionally so, and (except for dynastic alliances) all the women of the harem were chosen for their good looks. It was in her sexual prowess that Yehonala's power over the Emperor lay and it was this that brought her within reach of ultimate power. For a woman in China, and especially one confined within the sacred precincts of the Forbidden City, the bedroom was often the only route to influence and authority. It was also the means to obtain personal freedom. Deeply enmeshed in a system that used women purely as pleasure-objects and child-producers, Yehonala may have come to see sexual prowess as a means of empowering herself, of taking control of an otherwise dull, preordained future and as offering her a chance to be mistress of her own fate.

Like all the Imperial line, the Emperor Hsien Feng had been schooled in pleasure from a very early age. His tastes were said to be many and varied and, according to some, perverted. While he may not have been an Emperor Yang Ti (who when he travelled took with him a caravan of ten chariots, padded with red satin, on each of which lay a naked beauty, awaiting his attentions), it is certainly true that Hsien Feng was already a dissipated roué long before he encountered Yehonala. What sexual magic could this inexperienced girl of twenty-one have to offer that made her superior to all the other beauties of his harem?

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When she was inducted into the harem, stringent and intimate examinations ensured that Yehonala, like the rest of the new intake of concubines, had had no previous sexual contact with men. For the security and legitimacy of the Imperial line, all the Emperor's ladies had to be certified virgins. Once within the vermilion walls of the Forbidden City, with its 3,000 handmaidens and 3,000 eunuchs, the Emperor was the only intact male (other men were forbidden to spend the night within the Palace on pain of summary beheading). There therefore appeared to be very little chance of gaining the sexual experience necessary to hold an Emperor in thrall. How then, did Yehonala become proficient in these arts? It seems likely that it was what she did, and what she learned, in the five years *before* the Emperor was even aware of her existence in the Forbidden City, that set her apart from the other beauties of the harem.

What Yehonala's later life reveals is that nothing was left to chance in her bid to achieve and maintain power – and that whatever she needed to do was performed with dedication and application and energy. No doubt she would naturally have brought all these attributes to the Imperial bedchamber. But given her later lust for power, and the only route available for achieving such power, it seems likely that she would have dedicated much of the first five years of her time in the harem to practising every means at her disposal to please a lover: it is clear that, when the opportunity presented itself, it was mastery in the arts of love that was to single her out in the mind of the Emperor as exceptional.

Yin Daoism arose in the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25–220). Its adherents believed firmly in the importance of human sexual expression as an adjunct to mental and physical well-being. This branch of Daoism was responsible for numerous sex manuals, such as the *Yu Fang Mi Chueh* (Secret Codes of the Jade Room), the *Yu Fang Chih Ya* (Important Guidelines of the Jade Room) and the *Su Nu Ching* (Manual of Lady Purity). Anatomical details were hidden behind a code of poetical nomenclature. More than thirty love-making positions were documented, equally well camouflaged with elegant phraseology which included

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‘Approaching the Fragrant Bamboo’, ‘The Fish Interlock Their Scales’ and ‘The Leaping White Tiger’.²

Yin Daoism adopted a deeply aesthetic attitude towards sex; the emphasis was on the beauty and poetry of love-making, and its importance to health and longevity. The adherents believed that they could use sexual passion as a furnace in which to refine and concentrate their life energy, known as ‘qi’. Properly controlled, in a species of sexual alchemy, the accumulated ‘qi’ could be directed from the generative organs along the meridians of the spine to the brain, achieving higher states of consciousness and, as a by-product, increased longevity, even immortality.³ The philosophy was therefore no simple excuse for licentiousness – while the joys of love-making were there to be enjoyed, there was also a higher purpose and control was essential:

The arts of the bedroom constitute the climax of human emotions and encompass the totality of the Dao. Therefore the ancient sages regulated man’s external pleasures in order to control his inner passions, and they made detailed rules and terms governing sexual intercourse. If a man regulates his sexual pleasure, he will feel at peace and attain longevity. If, however, a man abandons himself to sexual pleasure without regard for the rules set forth in the ancient texts, he will soon fall ill and gravely injure himself.⁴

Certain techniques of feminine allure were closely guarded secrets, and at first taught only to those who were to become either the Empress or concubines of the Celestial Prince. A variety of tools were also used by young women, with the assistance of the palace eunuchs, to acquire sexual skills. A very ancient practice (at least two thousand years old) was the use of polished stone eggs to exercise the vaginal and pelvic floor muscles. Placed inside the body, the stones acted as a point of resistance against which these muscles could be stimulated in a series of complicated exercises. Recent excavations in the old Chinese capital of Xian have also brought to light skilfully crafted bronze prostheses of male organs dating

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from the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BC to AD 25).⁵ Chinese authorities have concluded that the skilful and lifelike nature of these artefacts could only have been achieved by artisans dedicated to this craft. Other finds, from the 1800s back to the earliest discoveries of the Warring States period⁶ have also been uncovered in female quarters of Imperial palaces or the houses of the nobility. Here then, would seem to be a possible source for Yehonala's skills.

Wherever Yehonala learned her skills, the events of her first night with the Emperor gave her the recognition she craved, and set in motion a train of events that would lead, ultimately, to the collapse of a Dynasty, to the fall of the mighty Manchu who, over two hundred years before, had ridden out from their dark northern forests to conquer the Chinese and to claim the throne of All Under Heaven.