

# 'Dragon Lady'—Not So Fierce After All

Fons Tuinstra writes from Beijing

History is often written to fit prevailing perceptions rather than past facts, and thus tends to fuel current prejudices. That, says the author of a controversial book released in Beijing, is exactly what happened with the apparently definitive account of the life of China's last empress. Gemini News Service reports on an attempt to re-write history.

HISTORY is about to be re-written in China: a book challenging the accepted view of the last empress—used by Westerners to justify anti-Chinese stereotypes and by the communists to justify their vilification of the old feudal order—is released by the state-owned publishing house in Beijing. A Chinese translation of *Dragon Lady*, the international best seller by Sterling Seagrave, is published early this year, confronting Chinese readers with a new account of the life of Cixi, "the last empress of China" who died in 1908.

The book attacks the work of three generations of sinologists and claims to expose a major historical fraud.

In the current view, the empress dowager Cixi (pronounced: Smel) is seen as an murderous nymphomaniac who killed anybody in her way.

Western powers used her evil reputation as an excuse to invade China in 1900, occupying parts of the country and finally destroying the imperial dynasty.

Seagrave claims the whole picture is based on forged documents and false information.

Seagrave paints Cixi as kind, indecisive and often misguided, a powerless puppet in the power struggle between factions of princes and warlords in the Forbidden City. Isolated from the outside world, Cixi never developed an independent view about developments in her country.

The common recollection of Cixi's role in Chinese history, says Seagrave, is mainly based on the account of the British journalist Sir Edmund Backhouse, who worked in Beijing at the turn of the century. His information

apparently included diaries, documents and verbal information from the Forbidden City.

However, it appears Backhouse fabricated the information. He described 200 visits to the Forbidden City and to the empress dowager, including details of his sexual experiences with the old lady.

But, says Seagrave, Backhouse never met Cixi and certainly did not perform any sexual acts with her. In a judgement which has lessons for contemporary politics and international disinformation campaigns, Seagrave says that the fraudulent account was a success because it was exactly

lost their lives, rather than the 300 of popular belief. He says no Boxer ever appeared at the legations, but the panic-ridden Westerners mistook Chinese troops sent to quieten the situation for attackers and started to kill Chinese at random.

Thousands of Chinese were killed for no reason at all. The Boxers mainly killed Chinese who had converted to Christianity—atrocities ignored by Westerners in Beijing wrapped up in their own imaginary problems.

Chinese scholars have taken the same view about their last empress because the negative image of the old feudal rulers



Empress Dowager Cixi: Murderous or meek?

one of their number," he says. "They are energetically advancing their careers, so they deride anyone who does not serve their cause."

Sinologist R G Tiedemann, lecturer in the history of the Far East of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, says that "as far as I know, the facts in Seagrave's book are correct."

For many Chinese today, the summer palace in Beijing, where Empress Cixi lived, is simply a place for a day out, to wander around, go rowing on the lake, eat ice cream. Their only concession to history is a stall where tourists can get a picture of themselves disguised as emperor or empress.

But the new version of history will trickle through. Many Chinese books and films have been inspired by Backhouse's distorted view of Empress Cixi. Seagrave undoubtedly will provide inspiration for new interpretations.

FONS TUINSTRA is a Dutch journalist currently living in China.

## BOOK REVIEW

Chinese Translation of *Dragon Lady* by Sterling Seagrave

Published by Vintage Books, New York.

what the Western powers wanted to hear at the time.

European countries were engaged in a power struggle within China. So it was important to paint the Chinese in the worst possible light.

Also new is Seagrave's interpretation of the "Siege of the Legations" in 1900, an attack on foreign embassies in Beijing by the Boxers, a rural anti-foreigners movement.

The conventional Western view is that heroic diplomats felt they were under siege from irrationally violent Chinese. The result was a major military intervention by the West and the occupation of Beijing.

Ultimately, China had to pay the Western victors \$300-million compensation.

According to Seagrave, 66 foreigners, mostly marines,

sued the post-revolutionary leadership.

The English and German versions of the book failed to spark off a serious discussion among sinologists. But Seagrave is not discouraged.

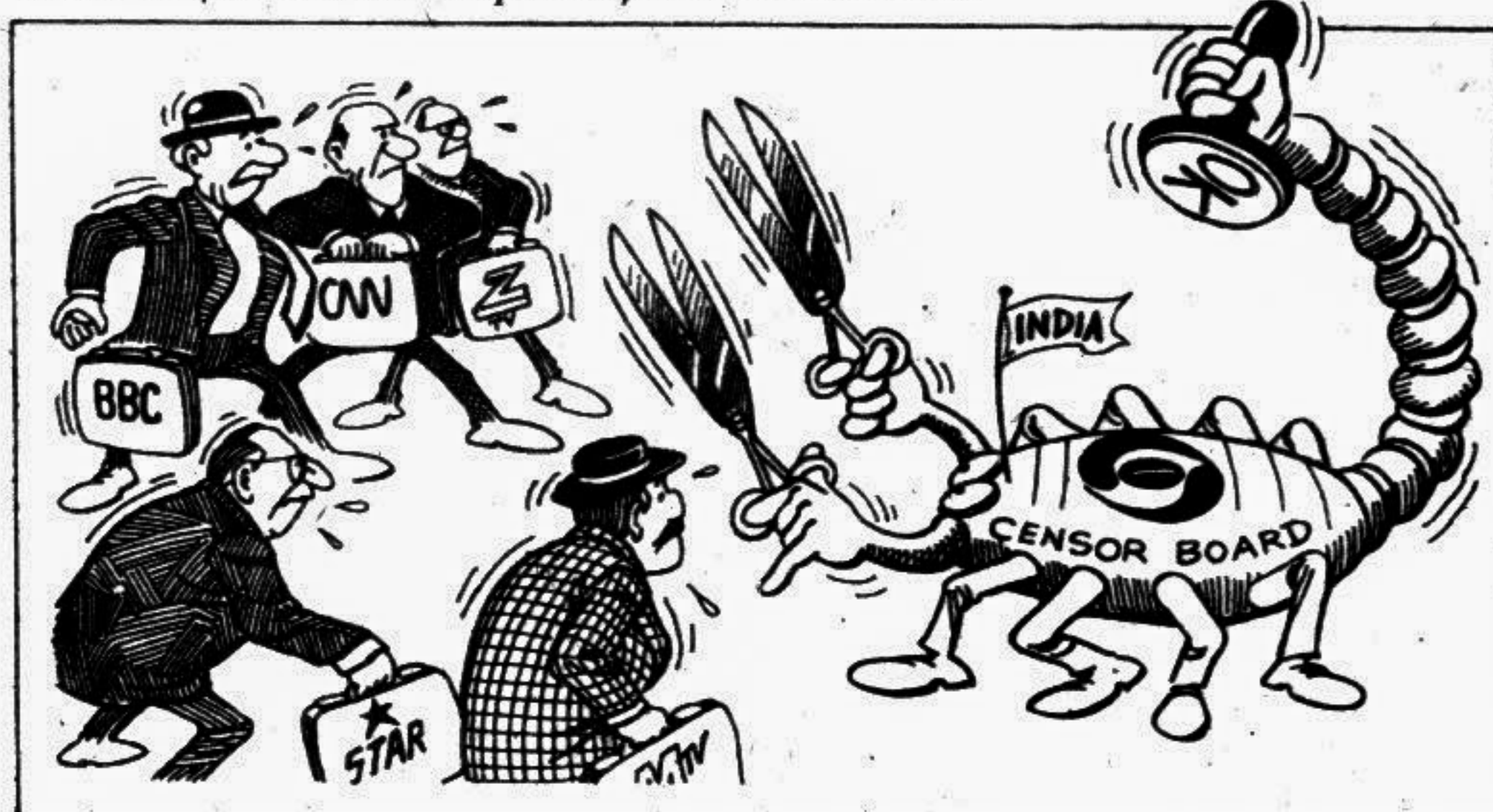
"Personally, I get a lot more satisfaction out of knowing that my book will be read by many thousands of Chinese, so it will gradually but permanently change the perception of history in Asia," he says.

"Many older sinologists in England and America will be offended by the critical and contrary tone of the book," agrees Seagrave. "So they will choose to ignore it and hope it goes away. It makes them look like lazy and opportunistic fools."

Younger sinologists "criticise the book because it is written by a journalist and not

# India: Cable and Scissors

Foreign satellite networks climb over each other (and the censors) to reach hundreds of million viewers in South-Asia. Mahesh Uniyal of Inter Press Service reports from New Delhi.



COFI's Sharma also complains against STAR's insistence that operators buy decoders to receive the encrypted channel. STAR sells the machine for US\$770, which Sharma says can be bought overseas at a cheaper price.

But Delaporte says the demand for STAR decoders is growing in India. STAR insists on selling its decoders to ensure standardisation and a "controlled system", he adds.

The controversy over the STAR movie channel has created a rift among Indian cable operators. Rakesh Datta of the Cable Networks Association of 800 operators says COFI is protesting because they find it difficult to get subscribers to pay the small extra charge for the STAR movie channel.

Most cable operators in the country have only 250 subscribers, against the minimum 1,000 each should have in order to be able to make a profit and expand the network, says Datta.

"We represent some of the more progressive cable operators," says Datta. "The future lies with pay channels which will help cable operators to grow in size."

So far, he says, cable operators have relied on video films that are mostly of poor quality

and infringe copyright laws. Datta adds that cable operators need not fear police raids because under the cable television ordinance, police can take action only on the advice of an official notified by the I and B ministry. While STAR TV denies its movie channel is a Russian satellite, has begun trial midnight telecasts of adult films.

The films are shown every Saturday and telecasts will continue for the next couple of months to gauge viewer reaction. Ironically, cable operators will not get into trouble for distributing Jain's adult fare, because the cable TV ordinance does not apply to free channels.

"We have studied the cable ordinance thoroughly and we are sure that by airing adult movies we are not contravening any law," J K Jain, a member of parliament and the Indian partner of the network, is quoted saying by newspa-

pers. The single-channel Jain TV is already popular with viewers for its Hindi and regional language movies and offers the main competition to the multi-channel STAR TV in India.

There will soon be a new entrant on the scene in the form of the US-based Turner Broadcasting System which has begun a free, round-the-clock movie and cartoon channel, now reaching only north-east India.

Turner's TNT channel beams 14 hours of cartoons and 10 hours of films, unlike only films by STAR movies and will turn into a pay channel from December. Also early next year, TNT will shift to the Astar-2 satellite and be available over all India.

The only home-grown competition is from the state-run Doordarshan network that has a vast reach than any satellite network and has been perking up its dull programmes to maintain its large viewership.

## Viewing Video

by Lenin Gani

NORTH (Elijah Wood) seems like the child every parent would love to have. He is intelligent and excels in everything he does in particular sports.

Unfortunately his parents are too busy bickering about petty issues to notice their son's needs. So North takes the unprecedented step of getting a court order to separate him from his parents.

North now embarks on a worldwide search for the perfect parents. His journey takes him from Tokyo to Hawaii. But each time his choice is made somehow they have to be rejected on certain grounds.

During his mission North frequently meets Bruce Willis who often tries to offer advice.

Realising that one's parents come only once, North ultimately gives up the search and returns home.

North is a family comedy worth watching.

Just when we thought the people at *Tinsel Town* had exhausted all the ways to get a story, they decide to make a film from a popular video game *Street Fighter*. And they even had the nerve to give Jean Claude Van Damme top billing in it.

Van Damme plays Colonel Guile, leader of an elite group of soldiers fighting the forces

of General Bison who wants to take over the world. This is your typical 'Good' versus 'Evil', so following the story won't be a problem. If you are a Van Damme fan I'm afraid he doesn't do much until he meets Bison during the final battle sequence. Since they employed so many characters we shouldn't blame him. Blanka looked like the real thing but Ken could have been a bit more muscular. However, what was more surprising was that Sagat proved to be more of a wimp rather than a fighter.

In *Direct Hit*, John Hath (William Forsythe) is a government agent who decides to go against the orders of his own organisation when assigned a mission to eliminate a young woman (Jo Champa) who had a one-time relationship with a US politician.

Hatch always carries out the job, but circumstances dictate otherwise. After learning she may be just a pawn in a vicious game played by the politician, Hatch decides to turn the tables on him and even his own boss (George Segal) who sends Richard Norton to kill him and the girl. But Hatch always seems to be one step ahead.

After dealing with Norton, Hatch goes after the politician.



NAME	TYPE	ENGLISH CAST
1 Street Fighter	(Action)	Jean Claude, Van Damme
2 North	(Comedy)	Elijah Wood/Bruce Willis
3 Peta Porter	(Comedy)	Dan Aykroyd
4 Legends Of Fall	(Hist/Drama)	Sophia Loren/Julia Roberts/Kim Basinger/Tim Robbins
5 Cold Steel	(Act/Thriller)	Anthony Hopkins/Brad Pitt Sharon Stone
6 The Shawshank Redemption	(Drama)	Tim Robbins
7 To Sleep With	(Drama)	Scott Valentine/Charlie A Vampire
8 Black Ice	(Action)	Don Wilson
9 Direct Hit	(Action)	William Forsythe/George Segal/Richard Norton/Jo Champa
10 The Ascent		Vincent Sparno/Ben Cross
11 War Dogs		Neil Duncan/Vincent Ricotta
12 Only The Strong		Mark Dacascos
13 Bad Company	(Thriller)	Ellen Barkin
14 Low Murder		Scott Valentine/Vanessa Angel
15 Four Junior Detectives	(Children/Com)	

Source: Film Fair Video and other clubs

## The New Found, Grameen Mahatma

by Shahed Latif

### BOOK REVIEW

*Pather Badha Shoreya Nin, Manushke Egute Din* by Dr Mohammed Yunus

Published by Subarna, 150 Dhaka Stadium, Dhaka 1000

institution building and poverty alleviation on a sustainable, ever increasing scale.

However, the speeches of Dr Yunus clearly reveal that he has gone much beyond the building up of a rural credit institution. He could be the successful builder of the nation provided the Government as well as the opposition firmly backed him up and extended the necessary support. Unfortunately the vital cooperation is essentially lacking. Grameen Bank today has a credit operation of over Tk 100 crore every month and the entire amount has gone to the poorest families of Gram Bangla. Given the vital cooperation, it can be developed into a Tk 1,000 crore monthly programme for a massive thrust against poverty which would not only secure the liveable incomes for the poorest 50 per cent of the population, but at the same time, ensure health through pure drinking water, sanitary latrine as well as production and consumption of vegetables in particular; vastly improved housing and a self-inspired literacy programme to bring about education for all within the shortest possible time.

Dr Yunus has gone through years of painstaking efforts in the very heart of Gram Bangla where today half the population are landless, denied of

two square meals a day while suffering from ignorance and disease. He has successfully attacked the problems and secured victory for millions of the poor of this country. Yet much more needs to be done. It is a gigantic task. Single-handed, he will continue to fight no doubt, but a national upsurge to unanimously adopt the Grameen ways including its efficient management and strict discipline would generate the necessary as well as sufficient conditions to jump the passage that separates the least developed Bangladesh from a newly industrializing Bangladesh. The book through its wide-scale dissemination should assist in the creation of the desirable awareness so that eventually the massive upsurge might occur. His speeches in the book do not deal with only the rural crisis—his vision stretches to what bio-technology and genetic engineering, micro-electronics and computer chips should bring about through revolutionary changes to our national economy.

The boldness of his writing is remarkable. He does not refrain in condemning terrorism at the universities, or forging strong economic cooperation links with India which have the potential to open the huge Indian market to our goods and services. Boldly, he has also put forward the possibility

of political linkage for the purpose of intensive subregional cooperation following the successful ASEAN model among our eastern neighbouring countries. His ideas, plans and programmes are not abstruse, inaccessible or expensive. They are also pragmatic schemes designed to be made operational through annual development programmes or reform and new legislation, in particular for vigorous local government institutions.

However, the reluctance to accept plans and programmes of Grameen Bank origin is only the reflection of an undesirable complex, perhaps psychological in origin in the minds of important decision-makers. Let us call it monumental inertia and Newton's first law of motion is doubly reinforced—hence we have fallen into a low level equilibrium trap and government is determined to keep it that way. The aid dependent traditional path of development that was followed in the past is still being followed—there has been no change or reform. Dr Yunus has shown time and again number that it is not sustainable: Tk 100,000 crore worth of past foreign aid have mostly gone down the drain.

It is incredible but true that while Grameen Bank has been creditably sustaining its 98 per cent repayment rate, the government through actual deeds and the opposition through words of mouth are determined to convert agricultural loans into grants. Rampant credit indiscipline is being further encouraged which is perhaps indicative of the deliberate non-recognition of Dr Yunus along with his Grameen Bank. But it does not matter. The rest of the world knows his worth. Best of all, the poorest majority of his compatriots know him best.

## Urban Situation

Continued from page 11  
main concern being legal aspects

### Urban Form

Baba Adam's and Binat Bibi's mosque certainly tell the presence of substantial building activities in Dhaka long before the arrival of the Mughals. But the nature and method of construction in the those days are obliterated through ravage and vagaries brought about with time.

Real extensive building activities were generated during Dhaka's status as Mughal capital beginning right from the 17th century till the advent of the 18th century. The Mughals, born-builders, inspired with the zeal of the Roman spirit and technique, did their architecture splendidly with local materials like brick. Brick, a unit consistent with human scale, was exploited to bring about buildings of grand scale. They maintained their experience and knowledge from their Central Asian origins and boldly used them

wherever they moved, setting aside indigenous cultural needs of the place. Sympathies to the vernacular were limited to local materials and climate.

Most of the masons they brought with them settled in the city and practiced their trade. New ideas with the new architects from the central capital inspired them while constructing new buildings. When the seat of power was transferred to Murshidabad, the impetus stopped. Masons and local architects remained involved only in assimilating what they already had.

With the coming of the British new ideas and order came along in contrast to the practice prevailing in Dhaka. The fusion took place and a colonial expression emerged. In the early 19th century buildings, a mix of Mughal and British architecture is found. Treabated roofing with tiles and rafters replaced massive vaulted roofs, pure arches emerged. Columns appeared with capitals bearing modified

Ponic and Corinthian orders, classical entablature with distinctive parts of architrave, frieze and cornice was there.

With the advent of the 20th century, the practice of colonial architecture reached its climax. The local masons had already developed the skill to manipulate the colonial order and the materials they were using. Generally, buildings of the colonial era might be classified into the following typologies: Private villa or mansions, dwellings, shophouses, administrative and institutional building, factories and warehouses and religious buildings.

Most of the colonial buildings were built along the river bank of Buriganga on the part of Dhaka they found utilised. None of the existing historical buildings were destroyed or intruded upon. The British having a superior technological background felt the need to protect the river front which was regularly eroded during the monsoon. They proposed and built and embankment called "Buckland Bund". This strip stretched

from Shambazar at the east to Babubazar at the west. Most of the eye-catching buildings were erected along the street. Because of visual and physical access to the river, the land along this street was expensive. This allowed only the affluent of the city to get a piece of land and build a house in the area.

The above narration attempts to give a precise account of the urban situation of Dhaka in the colonial era.

## From Farmers

Continued from page 12

ful people in his government who were involved in the business, but he had also severed the lifeline of thousands of ordinary Kenyans who depended on the mitumba for their livelihood.

When he lifted the ban, President Moi said: "I have realised that banning the second-hand clothes will be a great injustice and inconvenience to Kenyans. I have also realised that most Kenyans wear them. Even my cabinet ministers are putting them

Today, manufacturers claim the presence of mitumba and cheap articles of clothing from the Far East continues to stifle the growth and survival of the local textile industry.

"We particularly take note of the fact that rejects and off-season brand-new clothes are disposed of in Kenya by foreign departmental stores to create room for the new season's stocks," griped Johnson Ajowi Ogenjo, secretary general of the giant Kenya Textile and Tailoring Workers Union.

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