

The policy decisions of Emperor Guangxu concerning peace with Japan and his relationship to Empress Dowager Cixi

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At the end of nineteenth century, the Qing Dynasty form of governance was brought out from “behind the curtain” (*chuiliang tingzheng* 垂簾聽政) and directly assumed by Emperor Guangxu 光緒, while the Empress Dowager Cixi 慈禧 continued to enjoy a certain amount of political power. However, under the policy making mechanism shared by the Emperor and his mother, such empirical questions as how policy was actually decided, in what ways court retainers participated in the process and the interaction between the emperor and dowager when making policy decisions as yet remain unclear. The author’s research to date, based on analysis of the diaries and correspondence of the central figures in the policy making process, indicates that imperial audiences, the submission of memorials and court retainer councils were the three main means for the opinions of the Empress Dowager during her reign “behind the curtain” to be integrated with those of court retainers. Building upon these findings, the present article attempts to reconstruct the decision making process during the direct rule of Emperor Guangxu using the same kind of source materials and analytical methodology. More specifically, the author turns to the two diaries written by Weng Tonghe 翁同龢, entitled *Weng Tonghe Riji* 翁同龢日記 and *Suishouji* 隨手記, to examine the case of the dispatch of Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 to Japan as the plenipotentiary negotiator over the issue of ending the 1st Sino-Japanese War, and describe the process leading up to the decision to grant Li the authority to negotiate the conditions of the cession of Chinese territory to the Japanese.

This case shows that court retainers considered the major venue for decision making to be direct audiences with the Emperor, supplemented by councils held in the Chuangxin Dian 伝心殿 hall. It was here that they debated and ironed out the direction they thought should be taken in recognizing territorial cession,

from where they approached the Emperor to bring him over to their side. Meanwhile, the Emperor, from the very beginning of the process, used the presence of Weng Tonghe at these meetings to inject his own ideas into the general debate. Then, at the stage when cession became inevitable, the final decision was left to the Empress Dowager. However, Cixi refused to make the decision for reason of illness, thus forcing the Emperor to decide the matter on his own.

It is at this point that we can observe the existence of maneuvering between the Emperor and his mother, in order to avoid responsibility for making the final decision, after the fateful audience with court retainers convinced the Emperor to approve the territorial cession. Furthermore, from their words and actions, the author concludes that it was the Emperor Guangxi and Empress Dowager that made the actual decisions concerning government policy.