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Murder Most Foul

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Both the Guangxu Emperor and Empress Dowager Cixi died one hundred years ago this week (November 14 and November 15, respectively), and some of our favorite news sites and blogs have been commemorating the anniversaries, made more newsworthy by the recent revelations that Guangxu was (as has long been suspected) poisoned.

Here’s a short reading guide for whodunnit (the debate continues) and further reflections:

1. NPR’s Louisa Lim on the latest theories of Guangxu’s death:

"Guangxu died just 22 hours before the 74-year-old Empress Dowager Cixi. Imperial medical records indicated that Guangxu’s death was due to natural causes. But even then, there were rumors of murder most foul. Now modern science has uncovered the truth.

"We took a hair measuring 10 inches, and after analysis, we found its arsenic content was 2,400 times higher than normal,’ says Zhu Chenru, deputy director of the National Committee for the Compilation of Qing history. The research was carried out over the past five years by his institute, the China Institute of Atomic Energy, the forensic lab of the Beijing police and China Central Television."

2. Danwei made an earlier post on the same topic:

"Even in his own day, the cause of death was disputed. The emperor’s doctor’s diary recorded that Guangxu had ‘spells of violent stomach ache’, with his face turning blue. Such symptoms are consistent with arsenic poisoning. Actually, three persons were suspected behind the murder. The empress, her eunuch Li Lianying, and general Yuan Shikai, who betrayed Guangxu in the last days of the reforms and directly caused their failure."
"A new study aiming to find the truth behind the murder allegations has delivered its conclusions, right before the 100th anniversary of Guangxu’s death. A series of tests has established that the cause of Guangxu’s death was indeed arsenic poisoning, confirming a 100 year old rumor."

3. Jeremiah Jenne at Jottings from the Granite Studioriffs on the same theme:

“There has always been speculation about what really happened to Guangxu (and Tongzhi, for that matter). The timing was just a little too neat, a little too convenient for too many people at court. Cixi certainly feared what Guangxu might do if he ever had a chance to rule on his own. Yuan Shikai no doubt worried (probably with good reason) about retaliation for his duplicity 10 years earlier. Cixi’s long reign depended on a series of allies, henchmen, and toadies, all of whom were looking at unemployment (or worse) if Guangxu grabbed the reins of power. The general consensus was that it was probably best to off the guy and—fate of the dynasty be damned—put another kid on the throne, which is exactly what happened.”

4. As Geremie Barme notes in a piece that draws on his new book on the history of the Forbidden City, the court intrigue at the center of this story has more generally influenced Western perceptions of China and the Chinese people:

“...In many films, novels and plays, as well as in journalistic accounts, both Western and Chinese, there has been a tendency to conflate court secrecy, traditional politics and the intricate design of the palaces with the nature of the Chinese people and society as a whole.

“As Simone de Beauvoir remarked, the ‘city into which the population is not admitted has obviously usurped the title city.’

“The palace and its intrigues, its mystique and its history have thus played a central role in defining both Chinese and Western perceptions of China.”

5. The Guangxu Emperor is best known for his role in the abortive 1898 reform efforts. For a scholarly take on the importance of 1898 reforms, see the 2002 edited volume, Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China . (For a preview of the volume on Google see here.)

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