

## **A “Lord” with Ministers of the Same Mind: The Political Implications of Empress Dowager Cixi Bestowing “Imperial” Calligraphy**

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### **Abstract**

Empress Dowager Cixi wielded power in the Qing dynasty over a span of 48 years under the Tongzhi and Guangxu emperors, a period leaving behind numerous records of her writing large characters and her calligraphic works. Cixi’s practice of calligraphy was one of the political means she used to succeed in the system of the imperial enterprise. Her “imperial” calligraphy was given as New Year presents and as birthday gifts to prominent officials. She was, in fact, following in the long tradition of previous rulers over the centuries in employing the art of writing for political gain. The acts of Empress Dowager Cixi bestowing large-character calligraphy to officials and ministers thus had ulterior motives in terms of her subjects.

After receiving bestowals, Cixi’s ministers and officials would reply with memorials of gratitude in which they expressed loyalty to her. It was a reminder for them to think along the same lines when it came to their work involving matters of the country, in effect spurring them to follow through with court or local matters within their purview. The recipients of Cixi’s large-character calligraphic works saw them as auspicious omens from the heavens, portents for overcoming obstacles, and signs of peace and prosperity for the country. Empress Dowager Cixi’s “imperial” large-character calligraphy was therefore a medium of communication between this “lord” and her officials, serving as a testimonial to her political tactics.

**Keywords:** Empress Dowager Cixi, imperial calligraphy, bestowing “fortune” characters, auspicious omens, being of the same mind

(Translated by Donald E. Brix)