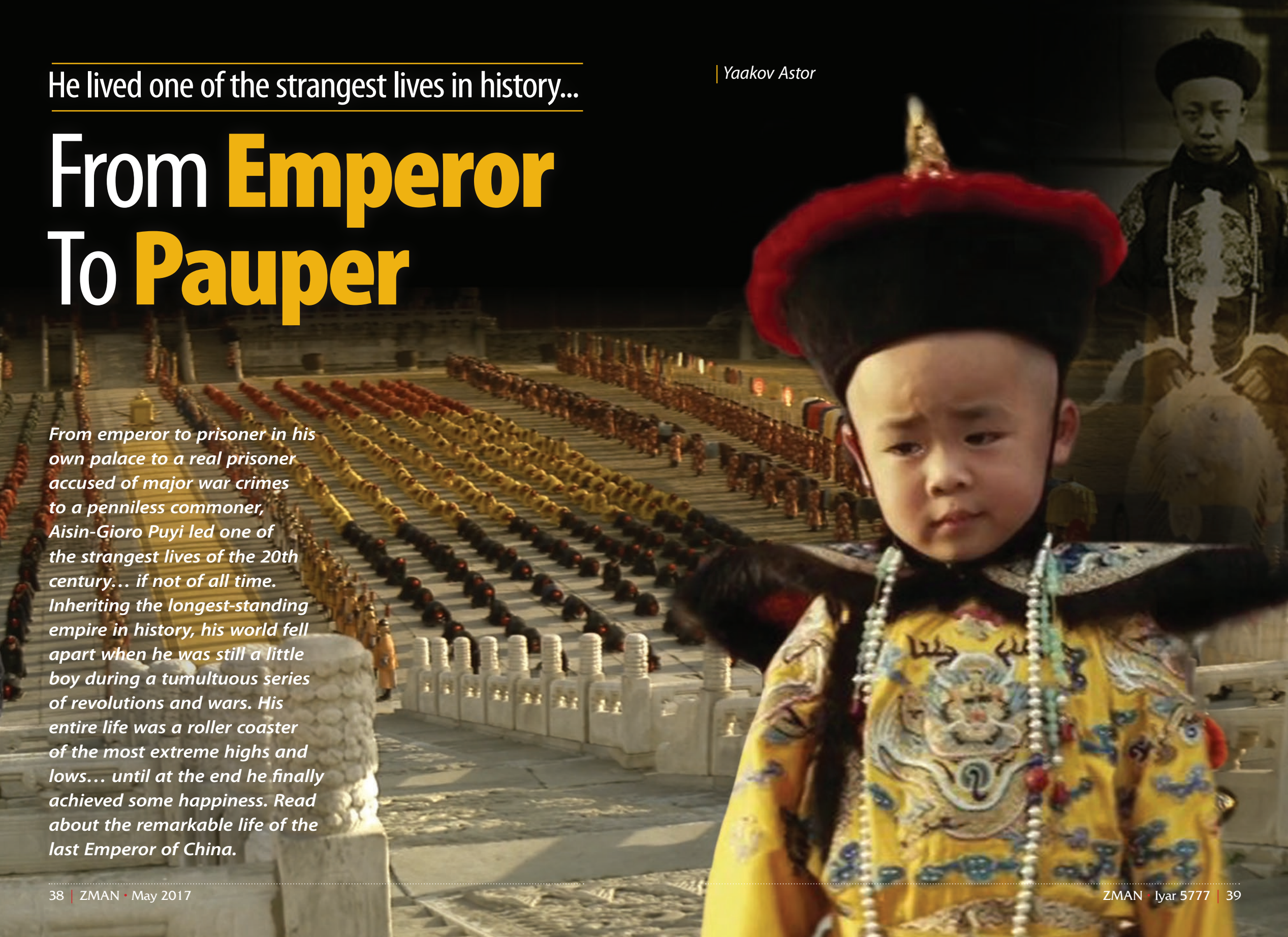


He lived one of the strangest lives in history...

| Yaakov Astor

From Emperor To Pauper

From emperor to prisoner in his own palace to a real prisoner accused of major war crimes to a penniless commoner, Aisin-Gioro Puyi led one of the strangest lives of the 20th century... if not of all time. Inheriting the longest-standing empire in history, his world fell apart when he was still a little boy during a tumultuous series of revolutions and wars. His entire life was a roller coaster of the most extreme highs and lows... until at the end he finally achieved some happiness. Read about the remarkable life of the last Emperor of China.



August 1946. A seemingly unremarkable man takes the stand in front of a war-crimes tribunal in Tokyo. Despite all appearances, he is no ordinary person. And his story is one of the most remarkable in history.

"My name is Aisin-Gioro Puyi," he tells the court, as a hush comes over it. "In 1908, I was Emperor of China."

Indeed, he is the last emperor of a world-conquering dynasty stretching back to a time before the Roman Empire. And he is about to share with the world the story of his unbelievable life, a life filled with the highest highs and the lowest lows....

An Emperor Is Born

Aisin-Gioro Puyi was born in Beijing, in February 1906. He was the nephew of Guangxu, the reigning emperor of the Qing (pronounced "Ching") dynasty.

More than 2,200 years earlier, Qin Shi Huang united the various warring kingdoms in Asia and gave himself the title of "Emperor," marking the beginning of Imperial China. Successive dynasties developed bureaucratic systems that enabled an emperor to control vast territories directly. The Qing would be China's last dynasty.

The Qings descended from a Chinese ethnic minority group called the Manchus,

who lived in the northeast of China. They had been ruling the vast country since 1644. For the first two years of his life, Puyi lived quietly in this palace in Beijing. His father was the emperor's brother, Zaifeng. However, dramatic events sweeping China were about to change the little boy's life forever.

Since the 1800s, industrial and political revolutions were spreading worldwide. Through it all, China remained a backward, feudal society. Technologically, socially and politically it had changed little in over 2,000 years. However, at the dawn of the twentieth century, civil unrest and conflicts between competing warlords became widespread in China. The times were ideal for major political upheaval.

Oblivious to the outside, the Qing rulers remained ensconced in their Beijing palace, called the Forbidden City. They saw it not merely as a magnificent edifice, but the very center of the universe. During the rare instances that they ventured out of it, they went to their summer palace, a tranquil retreat nearby.

Although Guangxu was Emperor of China, the real power was wielded by a remarkable—and remarkably ruthless—woman, Empress Dowager Tzu-hsi, the emperor's aunt. In her seventies, Tzu-hsi had been at the Imperial Palaces since the age of 16. Over the years, she had gained in power and influence, until she became the effective head of Imperial China. Even the emperor, Puyi's uncle, knelt before her. Her technique was to dominate the reigning emperor from a very young age—first, her own six-year-old son; then Guangxu from the age of three. Guangxu was now in his thirties and still childless. Fearing for her family's dynastic continuity, Tzu-hsi looked for a new boy emperor to manipulate.

When Guangxu fell gravely ill with a mysterious ailment, Tzu-hsi issued what would turn out to be her final decree. Two-year-old Puyi, she said, was to succeed as emperor. The little child was immediately summoned to her presence in the Forbidden City. Neither his father nor mother was allowed to accompany him.



At age two, the new (and last) emperor of China. (Re-enactment.)

Providentially, Emperor Guangxu died the very next day. Almost unbelievably, Tzu-hsi herself died only 24 hours later. The timing was extraordinary. At an induction ceremony shortly thereafter, the little boy was placed on the gilded throne as the Tenth Emperor of the Qing dynasty. Tiny two-year-old Puyi was Emperor of China.

Momentous Events

Meanwhile, outside the palace momentous events were taking place. Sun Yat-Sen, a Chinese revolutionary, was calling for a republic. He galvanized many people who saw his call as an opportunity to end the Qing dynasty's centuries-old reign of dominance.

Since Puyi was so young, his father, Zaifeng, and the previous emperor's widow, Empress Dowager Longyu, made decisions in the Qing court. When Sun Yat-Sen's rebellion spread throughout China, they ordered it crushed—only to find that their army no longer obeyed its commander.

They were forced to appoint popular general Yuan Shikai to resolve the crisis. A cunning and ambitious politician more than a loyal general, he engineered Zaifeng's resignation as regent. With Zaifeng out of the way, Yuan bluntly informed Empress Dowager Longyu that the young Emperor Puyi had to abdicate the throne. Unbeknownst to them, Yuan Shikai had been promised the position of President of the Republic of China if he could get the Qing court to abdicate.

In January 1912, Sun Yat-Sen proclaimed the Republic of China. In February, Emperor Puyi abdicated and Yuan was made president, as promised. An agreement known as "The Articles of Favorable Treatment of the Emperor" allowed Puyi to remain in the palace and also gave him a substantial allowance to maintain a court and household of servants. However, he was nothing more than a figurehead. The



A three-year-old Puyi (right), standing next to his father (Zaifeng, Prince Chun) and his younger brother Pujie.



A seemingly unremarkable man takes the stand in front of a war-crimes tribunal in 1946. "My name is Aisin-Gioro Puyi," the man begins. "In 1908, I was Emperor of China."