



Phyllis Birnbaum, *Manchu Princess, Japanese Spy: The Story of Kawashima Yoshiko, the Cross-Dressing Spy Who Commanded Her Own Army*

Columbia University Press, 2015. x + 252 pages. 22 illustrations, main characters, chronology, a note on the text, notes, acknowledgements, index. Hardcover, \$30.00/£20.50; E-book, \$29.99/£20.50. ISBN: 9780231152181 (hardcover); 9780231526340 (e-book).

YOSHIKO KAWASHIMA (1907–1948) is one of the most interesting characters to evolve during the brutal years of the 1930s and 1940s when Japan invaded China and sought to become the new powerhouse in East Asia. Born Aisin Gioro Xianyu, she began her life in Beijing at the tail end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). She was the fourteenth daughter of a Manchu prince whose ultimately failed goal was to stage a coup d'état to restore the Manchus to power. He had thirty-eight children, so he sent his daughter to Japan to be raised by a Japanese political fanatic, Naniwa Kawashima, who promoted his causes. As Yoshiko Kawashima she settled down in her adopted country, but throughout her life she could never really decide whether she was really Chinese, Manchu, or Japanese.

Naniwa Kawashima raised Yoshiko as a young Japanese girl, but he never listed her in the family register which would have given her Japanese citizenship. Yoshiko

never blended in anywhere and was in effect a woman without any national identity. Rather than choosing sides she concocted her own very bizarre personality that caused trouble in her relations with both Chinese and Japanese. As a school girl in the Japanese city of Matsumoto, she often rode horseback to school as befit a Manchu princess. She also absorbed her adoptive father's beliefs about how it was her obligation in life to devote herself to bringing the Manchus back to power which in the 1930s meant supporting the creation of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo.

Yoshiko Kawashima envisioned herself as an Asian Joan of Arc and found herself often labeled by the press as an Asian Mata Hari. Her high birth gave her societal prominence and her exploits won her wide attention in the press. A prominent Japanese journalist portrayed her character in a best-selling novel in the 1930s. A public audience in both Japan and China followed her every move and she was even the subject of a *New York Times* feature article in the early 1930s.

Yoshiko's public image included a short handsome haircut and a genuine military uniform although she was not in a formal sense connected to any military establishment. Men exploited her and it is very possible that her adoptive father, and his father as well, raped her on occasion. She had a brief marriage and became the mistress of several leading Japanese generals and businessmen. She was a very intelligent person who could blend into the Chinese public and work as a spy for the Japanese military. It is also believed that when one of her lovers, Japanese general Ryūkichi Tanaka, wanted to divert the world's attention away from Tokyo's seizure of Manchuria, he instigated the bloody Shanghai Incident of early 1932 that involved a Japanese military attack on Chinese forces. Yoshiko sparked the incident by persuading Chinese workers she knew to start a riot against Japanese in the city.

Yoshiko was known for her short temper. As Commander Jin, she built a reputation as a spy, and also formed her own loose battalion of Chinese and Manchurians and led them into battle in support of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. Unfortunately for her, she became deeply involved with promoting the Japanese puppet state that Japan had created there and she was for a while gratified by Japanese propaganda which used her status as a Manchu princess to bolster their claim of Manchu-Japanese harmony. Later the Japanese became angered when Yoshiko publicly criticized them for not sincerely supporting a truly independent Manchurian state. Sadly, her open support for Manchukuo was one of the reasons Nationalist Chinese forces arrested her in Beijing after the war and executed her in March 1948 as a traitor.

Phyllis Birnbaum, a Japan historian and a well-known novelist, biographer, journalist, and translator, has produced a fascinating tale of a woman who played a prominent role in the muddled conflicts in East Asia before and during the Pacific War. In a larger sense this work is also a fine history of the Japanese invasion of China and the legacy of the Manchukuo endeavor. The writing here is clear and the research is superb. No fictional character could ever remotely compete with the legacy of this controversial princess.

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