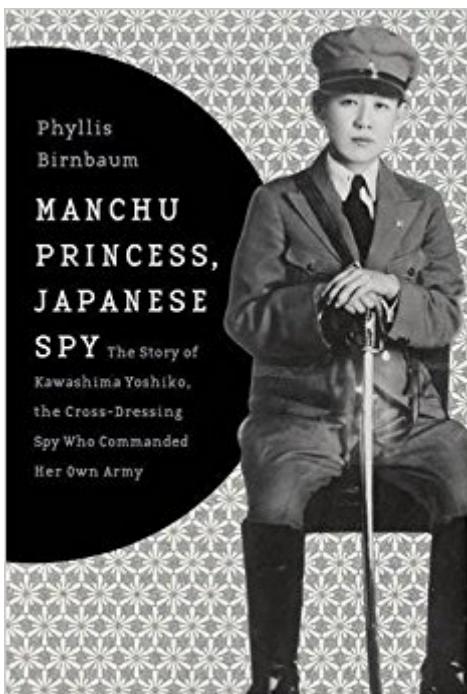


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Manchu Princess, Japanese Spy: The Story Of Kawashima Yoshiko, The Cross-Dressing Spy Who Commanded Her Own Army (Asia Perspectives: History, Society, And Culture)



Synopsis

Aisin Gioro Xianyu (1907â “1948) was the fourteenth daughter of a Manchu prince and a legendary figure in China’s bloody struggle with Japan. After the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1912, Xianyu’s father gave his daughter to a Japanese friend who was sympathetic to his efforts to reclaim power. This man raised Xianyu, now known as Kawashima Yoshiko, to restore the Manchus to their former glory. Her fearsome dedication to this cause ultimately got her killed. Yoshiko had a fiery personality and loved the limelight. She shocked Japanese society by dressing in men’s clothes and rose to prominence as Commander Jin, touted in Japan’s media as a new Joan of Arc. Boasting a short, handsome haircut and a genuine military uniform, Commander Jin was credited with many daring exploits, among them riding horseback as leader of her own army during the Japanese occupation of China. While trying to promote the Manchus, Yoshiko supported the puppet Manchu state established by the Japanese in 1932â •one reason she was executed for treason after Japan’s 1945 defeat. The truth of Yoshiko’s life is still a source of contention between China and Japan: some believe she was exploited by powerful men, others claim she relished her role as political provocateur. China holds her responsible for unspeakable crimes, while Japan has forgiven her transgressions. This biography presents the richest and most accurate portrait to date of the controversial princess spy, recognizing her truly novel role in conflicts that transformed East Asia.

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Customer Reviews

Manchu Princess, Japanese Spy is an even-handed biographical study of a fascinating woman who

may have been a secret agent during the Pacific War. Phyllis Birnbaum covers Kawashima Yoshiko's background as a Manchu princess and her further adventures after being adopted in Japan in detail, using virtually every primary source available, as well as novels based on her life. (Janine Beichman, Daito Bunka University, Tokyo)Richly illustrated with rare photos, and enlivened by numerous interviews, Phyllis Birnbaum's book is a balanced, well-written biography of one of the most notorious figures to emerge in the early twentieth-century contest for empire in northeast Asia. Anyone interested in the personal dimension of Sino-Japanese relations during the period of their most problematic intensity will find much profit in reading these stories of the life of Kawashima Yoshiko, many told through the memories of the men and women who loved her and hated her, often at the same time. (Mark C. Elliott, Harvard University)Birnbaum presents a colorful portrait of the controversial figure as she participated in conflicts that transformed East Asia. (Publishers Weekly)Birnbaum does her utmost to unravel the threads that make up Yoshiko's legacy... in this thoughtful biography of a complicated woman. (Library Journal)Phyllis Birnbaum's book attempts to cut through the myths surrounding Kawashima, and is an excellent overview of her life. (Japan Times)[Yoshiko] emerges as a woman supremely in command of her own fiction, even to the last. (New York Times Book Review)Japanese expert Birnbaum brings both [Yoshiko's] life and myth to an English-speaking or Western audience. She skilfully weaves her way through the complex political situation in pre-war China and gives an evocative account of the chaos of multinational Shanghai. Sensibly, the author keeps her controversial subject at arms length, steers clear of concurring with sensationalist claims about her exploits, and expresses a balanced take on most aspects of Yoshiko's life. (Asian Review of Books)Even-handed and fair. (Japan News)Named one of the 15 best books of the year by the Women in the World Blog at the New York Times (Women in the World Blog, New York Times)A fascinating tale of a woman who played a prominent role in the muddled conflicts in East Asia before and during the Pacific War.... The writing here is clear and the research is superb. (Asian Ethnology)

Kawashima Yoshiko (born Aisin Gioro Xianyu, 1907–1948) was the daughter of a Manchu prince. After the fall of the Manchu dynasty, she was raised by a Japanese friend of her father to restore the Manchus to their former glory. Her dedication to this cause, including supporting the puppet state established by the Japanese in 1932, ultimately got her executed for treason after Japan's defeat. The truth of Yoshiko's life is still a source of contention between China and Japan. This biography presents the richest and most accurate portrait to date of the controversial princess spy.

This biographical account of Kawashima Yoshiko relates the unsettled life of a woman who was mentally unstable and today would be classified as gender confused. Yoshiko was a daughter of Prince Su, heir to the throne of the Qing, the deposed dynasty of China as of 1912. Her father gave this unwanted daughter to a Japanese friend and political patron to raise when she was eight. Raised as Japanese, to think and act as Japanese, to identify as Japanese. Yoshiko identified herself as male-gendered early in her teens. After she came of age she wore men's clothing and short hair in male style. Despite this, she had many male lovers and suitors. She also proclaimed a young woman as her wife. Her status as a princess of the Manchu royal family and her antics gave the Japanese press many chances of writing articles about her just like the media stars of today. The Japanese army wanted to use her for propaganda purposes when the decision was made to create the independent state of Manchukuo. At one point she created for herself the identity of Commander Jin, leader of a militia made up of former bandits and criminals that was used to further the goal of the Imperial Army to pacify Chinese rebels. After a few years however it appears that her mental state became increasingly erratic. The decision was made to keep such a person away from any important matters. Her drug abuse and subsequent public rantings became an embarrassment for the Japanese. After the failure of her restaurant business and the beginning of the Pacific War she only made occasional appearances, usually denouncing the war and pleading for Japanese-Chinese reconciliation. Arrested as a war criminal by the Nationalist Chinese after the war, she met her fate in 1948. Four stars for being a good read at 224 pages and the author keeps the reader interested even when the narrative gets sidelined by other information. Recommended as an interesting biography and for Asian studies students. Now interested in reading the author's other works.

Manchu Princess, Japanese Spy by Phyllis Birnbaum. As an American reader who was totally unfamiliar with the life of Kawashima Yoshiko, I found the story of this real-but-legendary woman, jaw-droppingly incredible. Already of only elementary school age Yoshiko drew great attention to herself for her outlandish behavior, especially in conservative Japan. She rode a horse to school, dressed and talked as a man, spoke up to adults like equals (she was a Chinese princess, after all); and by her mid twenties she had lovers—male (who were high-up in the power structure of Japan), and likely female as well. She seems to have been a spy, either for Japan or China, or both; she was an aviator, a dancer, a restaurateur, and the model for the (somewhat) fictionalized character in a very popular Japanese book of 1933, *The Beauty in Men's Clothing*. And, oh, did I say she was also the commander of an army that was involved in the Battle of Rehe in 1932? (The

early 1930s were really big years for her). Besides all of this she had a lust and knack for publicity—“the Japanese public devoured every tidbit they could find about her, and there was lots in the newspapers. In short, the myth grew much greater than the woman and she became like contemporary media personalities of today who are famous for being famous. All of the foregoing is to inform the reader what Phyllis Birnbaum was up against in presenting a credible account of this utterly unbelievable character. I would think the task similar to trying to figure out the facts in a murder mystery—“what really happened and what didn’t. Birnbaum took an approach similar to a particular style of movie or television documentary (think *Grey Gardens*). She does not tell the story chronologically. Facts regarding Yoshiko’s early life are mixed together with later facts, and material that is only hearsay or has obscure sources appears on the same pages with information stemming from direct interviews between Birnbaum and the very few remaining relatives who directly knew the Manchu princess. What was real, what was myth? Gradually by presenting the various story fragments, one by one, and out of sequential order, a structure of the whole life of a picaresque character emerges, whether all the details are true or not. Birnbaum’s account suggests the truth, but doesn’t insist on it. She rigorously quotes her sources and has opinions on their reliability. Nevertheless, she leaves it to the rational, thinking reader to sift through “facts” along with her to construct a plausible persona that fits historical reality. Even accepting a minimal amount of information as factual, the old adage that “truth is stranger than fiction” certainly fits a description of this Manchu princess who was also a Japanese spy. But besides being an amazing biography, those unfamiliar with Sino-Japanese relations of the 1930s-40s will also find Birnbaum’s book an interesting and illuminating read.

The author made a good effort in researching Yoshiko and the times she lived in but as a historian I find that her work digressed and sidelined a lot and there were many other characters who were given more weighting than Yoshiko. So 2 stars for research. I would have given this 5 stars if this was really a biography about Yoshiko. More detail should have been given to her life and her activities as a spy. A bit disappointing.

Fascinating story; we’ll be discussing it at our book club at The Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens in Delray/Boca Raton. Another good spy story is Dick Schmidt’s new “Memory Road”.

Fascinating read about a unique historical figure. If you have any interest in modern Chinese history, this book is well worth your time. The author attempts to get past the legend and myths built

about and around this Manchu princess to reveal who she really was. I am not sure the effort was completely successful, but I definitely learned a great deal about Kawashima's life and the times in which she lived.

excellent story of the daughter of the last emperor of Manchu, China . And her exploits in China and Japan. Zona Roberts

There were not enough illustrations of the actions of the spy. It was confusing in parts.

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