
*Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling* provides an intriguing account of the extraordinary life of the “Manchurian princess” Der Ling 德齡 (1885-1944). Situated within the rapid historical changes and cross-cultural context of the early twentieth century, this book succeeds in bringing Der Ling to life, conveying a vivid story and offering a fresh perspective on this fascinating woman “of contradictions, of passions and prejudices, of unresolved identity” (p. 337).

Written in an accessible, graceful style, and well-illustrated with a collection of seldom seen photographs, the biography is divided into three parts, with many colorful vignettes woven into the tapestry of historical turmoil. The first section relays the story of the young Der Ling, her unusual Euro-Asian origin of birth, her Western-style education, and her family’s life in China, Tokyo, and Paris. Hayter-Menzies pays sufficient attention to the role that her broad-minded father Yu Keng 裕庚, a “Lord” with mixed origins, played in her early years. Other family members, including her mother, Louisa Pierson (the daughter of a Boston merchant living in Shanghai and his Chinese wife), remain in the background. In her own account, Der Ling informs readers little about her mother’s side of the family, and instead emphasizes her Manchurian roots while downplaying her “foreign” side. The first section of *Imperial Masquerade* also discusses her exposure to the modern world in Paris and Tokyo, and her interactions with Sarah Bernhardt and Isadora Duncan, which helped shape her intellectual growth and character development. The depiction of Der Ling’s childhood and teenage years serves the purpose of explaining the origin of her unflinching, courageous personality, as well as her cosmopolitan airs and refusal to conform to Confucian rules. The book attempts to reconstruct an image of Der Ling as an independent, gifted, modern woman, and the author accomplishes this task by unearthing the roots of these characteristics in Der Ling’s youth.

The second section of the book provides a most interesting depiction of Der Ling’s life in the court of Empress Cixi 慈禧 (1835-1908) where she claimed she served as a favored lady-in-waiting, and worked as a translator from 1903 to 1905. Hayter-Menzies utilizing Der Ling’s intimate, personal accounts, also paints a delightful and unusually intimate portrait of Cixi. He describes her daily activities instead of simply placing her in a political context. To some extent, Cixi comes off as an ordinary grandmother: charming, temperamental, out of fashion but willing to keep up an attempt, always nosy about others’ personal lives. For instance, in order to keep Der Ling in her court, Cixi arranged a marriage for her, a move that would surprise no one in a culture where older women often made matches for their younger counterparts. Der Ling later audaciously rejected the marriage

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proposal and married an American man of her own choosing. These detailed personal stories cobble together a caring, humane, domesticated image of Cixi, offering an alternative to the stereotyped xenophobic and malicious Empress. At court, Der Ling became one of Cixi’s main windows to modern Western culture (through clothes, accoutrements, modern dance, photography, and so on). In these interactions, Cixi demonstrates a moderate degree of curiosity, receptiveness, and ambivalence toward other cultures.

The later years of Der Ling’s life occupy the final section, with a focus on her writing career, public life, and personal fame. Her life ended with a tragic death in a car accident in 1944 in Berkeley, California, where she was living as an obscure language teacher. Der Ling, who always felt herself a foreigner in China, reinvented herself as a “Manchurian princess” in her books, and in America saw herself as an expert on Chinese politics and a spokesperson for Chinese women. She managed to “exploit her fame, [and] assure her notoriety, as [a] former court lady” (p. 285), but used her fame not for economic gains but for good causes such as participation in relief efforts for China, which at the time was suffering the devastating effects of the Second World War. By claiming to be a princess from the Qing court, she authenticated her narratives and claimed for herself the right to speak for China. She seems to have enjoyed the masquerade, shifting identities as easily as she changed her clothes, from the sumptuous imperial regalia that she wore to give public lectures, to her customary fashionable Western clothes. She demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to other cultures, even akin to a chameleon-like sensibility. In Hayter-Menzies’ view, Der Ling achieved an awareness as a modern woman, moving smoothly between different cultures and taking advantage of the circumstances in which she found herself. At the same time, he also perceptively points out the contradictions and ironies embodied in her complicated relationship with identity.

One of the key issues in this biography is the image of Cixi that Der Ling created for her Anglo-American readers. Shrouded in mystery, the image of Cixi is a focal point of Western fascination with the East, as well as its projection of its erotic imagination of the Orient. Representing and selling the image of Cixi or imperial China in a modern, global market involves a complicated calculation of different political, aesthetic, and economic concerns. Der Ling published her first book in English, *Two Years in the Forbidden City*, in 1911 and seven other books in the 1920s and 1930s. Other contemporaneous publications on the Qing court included Katherine Carl’s *With the Empress Dowager of China* (1905), Isaac Taylor Headland’s *Court Life in China* (1909), Sarah Pike Conger’s *Letters from China* (1909), and Philip Sergeant’s *The Great Empress Dowager of China* (1910) (p. 275). The popular book by J.O.P. Bland and E. Backhouse, *China Under the Empress Dowager* (1910), offers mesmerizing, graphic descriptions of the Manchu court in its most critical period, and was a sensational success when it was published.  

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