



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

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Aisin Gioro Xianyu (1907--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 various 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 1932, which became one of the reasons 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 most accurate and colorful portrait to date of the controversial princess spy, recognizing her truly novel role in conflicts that transformed East Asia.

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

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# **From Reader Review Manchu Princess, Japanese Spy: The Story of Kawashima Yoshiko, the Cross-Dressing Spy Who Commanded Her Own Army for online ebook**

## **Danny Reid says**

Interesting book intent on dissecting the myth of Manchu princess Yoshiko's wild life. It feels disjointed because so much of it is analysis and refutations of other sources, meaning that this is better for serious Sino-Japanese War scholars than those looking for a straight biography.

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## **Stephen Joyce says**

Divisive figures often make the most compelling biographical subjects; and Kawashima Yoshiko is no exception. During her life and in death opinions have varied markedly. Loathed by the Chinese as a traitor, extolled by the Japanese for her talents as a spy, more recently she has even become a heroine to the LGBT community.

Phyllis Birnbaum provides a measured assessment of the fascinating rise and fall of this erratic, narcissistic, cross-dressing, bisexual princess.

Born in 1907 as Aisin Gioro Xianyu, Kawashima Yoshiko was the 14th daughter of Prince Su of the Qing imperial family. Soon after the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, she was unwillingly sent to Japan to be adopted by family friend Kawashima Naniwa.

Her formative teenage years were spent in Matsumoto being educated in Japanese language and culture. It was not the happiest of upbringings. An attempted suicide and sexual assault by her new father are noted as potentially life-defining events but are hard to verify. Whatever the root cause of her discontent, in 1925 she shaved her head and started wearing men's clothes.

In 1927 she married a Mongolian prince in a politically convenient union that quickly failed and Yoshiko soon travelled to China to pursue her dream of a honorable return to power for the Qing dynasty, beginning with Manchuria and Outer Mongolia.

With Japan increasingly active in China she soon found herself a *raison d'être*: a spy in the service of the Japanese. Several incidents define her status as a spy; all are shrouded in mystery.

First, in her role as a sexually voracious, manipulative and well-connected socialite living it up in the cocktail bars of Shanghai, she charmed Chinese officials into revealing useful information for the Japanese. Second, her daring part in spiriting the reluctant, opium-addicted Empress Wanrong out of her benign imprisonment in Beijing to be with the Emperor Puyi (the "Last Emperor") in Lushun in order to legitimise the new Japanese-controlled puppet state of Manchukuo. Third, in 1932 she took part in a plot (originated by her new lover Tanaka, an officer in the Kwantung Army) to stir up a violent backlash against the Japanese in Shanghai, which paved the way for an aggressive Japanese intervention.

Later, her military adventures as Commander Jin Bihui also become the stuff of legend—tales of Yoshiko riding into battle as part of the Kwantung Army to defeat the Chinese rebels in Manchuria were splashed all over the papers and gossip magazines of the day.

Describing Yoshiko's achievements in battle as "minor or nonexistent", Birnbaum argues that she and other contemporaries most likely exaggerated the significance of her role and influence as a spy and a fighter.

However, what is reasonably clear is that by various subterfuge means she passed on Chinese secrets to the Japanese, fomented anti-Japanese feeling in Shanghai, and fought in the battle against Chinese insurgents in

Manchukuo—thereby enabling Japan to cement its pre-war foothold in the north of China.

Later on it clicks with Yoshiko and indeed with the deposed Emperor that the Japanese have ulterior motives: lebensraum for their geographically-stressed population and the use of Manchukuo as a buffer against Soviet Union aggression. When she starts to publicly criticize the terrible effects of the Japanese occupation and colonisation on the native Manchurian people (in a rare moment of wider awareness and solidarity), she becomes persona non grata and is lucky to escape an assassination plot.

Her star now descending, Yoshiko moves back to Tianjin (near Beijing) where she becomes a restaurant owner. But trouble finds her again, this time with near fatal results. At the end of the war she is captured by the victorious Chinese and put on trial for treason, with a capital verdict a foregone conclusion.

Until the end, Yoshiko liked to think of herself as a sacrificial lamb—a Joan of Arc to her noble cause.

Instead, many will conclude that she was a self-deluded elitist hopelessly on the wrong side of history.

Despite being the subject of novels, films, plays and even video games, the story of Yoshiko beyond the salacious aspects of her life is less well known in the West. In a series of short chapters, Japanese expert Birnbaum brings both her 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.

\* \* \*

In some ways, this is an unconventional biography: one chapter compares her life to that of Sag Hiro, a Japanese woman brought up in China and married to the Emperor's brother. Also, there is a brief outline of the life of Yoshiko's real father, who rarely features elsewhere. Yoshiko herself is not mentioned in either chapter. Further, the chronological narrative is punctuated by the biographer's interviews with surviving relatives and others prominent in Yoshiko's life. While interesting, these chapters feel like separate academic essays or history magazine articles rather than elements of a cohesive biography.

Although it would be hard to argue that she had a major influence over the key events of her time,

Kawashima Yoshiko is a superb subject for biography and should interest all lovers of Asian history. And despite living her life in the public and media glare her essential mysteriousness remains—even in death. Did the Chinese Nationalist government execute her (as Kim Bai Fai) in 1948 or, as some would have it, did she escape and live out her last days quiet obscurity? Birnbaum concludes that the latter outcome is questionable, to say the least. Assuming she was indeed executed, her memoirs reveal a wry acceptance of her ultimate fate, despite her life aims lying in tatters.

The sheer wealth of material—autobiographies, Yoshiko's letters, interviews, press reports, sensationalist magazine articles and official documents—with which to write a biography to some extent serves to cloud rather than illuminate the life of Yoshiko Kawashima. Much like her futile efforts to restore the Qing dynasty in China, any attempt to firmly pin down her real life story and true character seems destined to fail.

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## **Bandit says**

I was provided a copy of this book by NetGalley, so thanks to NetGalley and Simon and Schuster. As a history buff I tend to concentrate on other areas and eras and so Sino Japanese relations of the time prior to, during and immediately after WWII that this book covers were all new to me. And incredibly fascinating. Here credit must be given to Birnbaum. Some history can be somewhat tedious to plod through, she brings history to life. This was easily one of the most dynamic nonfiction books I've ever had the pleasure of reading. One can only imagine the exhaustive research that must have gone into this project, but it works so well, the combination of facts, interviews, written materials, etc. all creates a cohesive vivid complicated

world where the main heroine spent her tragically short life. Manchu Princess was a tragic character indeed, not inherently great character maybe, but made fascinating by the precarious circumstances of being torn between her country of birth (China) and adoptive country (Japan) and never quite belonging. By not inherently great...she had grand aspirations, rambling ambitions of peaceable coexistence of her two mother nations, of reclaiming her birthright, but not so much of a follow through, always too conflicted, too ambivalent, too confused and confusing...and not just with the dressing up as a man as if forever unable to make a choice resulting in going along with some incredibly dangerous schemes and in the end paying the ultimate price. *Beauty in Men's Clothing* (a title of the book of lethal significance based on her life) was just one of the examples of the blurred line between fiction and reality that cost her so dearly. There is an excellent amount of photographs in this book and I don't think they quite convey the beauty, but the book and the photos certainly and terrifically convey the multilayered complexity of the heroine, not to mention a cast of various characters large enough to warrant a *dramatis personae* introduction. There was a quote I once read about how someone doesn't have to be good, so long as they are interesting. Birnbaum has definitely succeeded with picking a most interesting subject. This book is a success in general, perfect balance of educational and entertaining, edutainment actually, which is shockingly a real word. Not often one encounters a history book (any book) so difficult to put down. Excellent read. Highly recommended.

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## **Eustacia Tan says**

It's time for a very rare book review! Anyway, I requested this book from NetGalley because it's an aspect of World War II that I haven't heard about before, I mean, I don't know about you, but I've never heard of a Kawashima Yoshiko in any of my textbooks.

Kawashima Yoshiko (born Aisin Gioro Xian Yu; 1907-??) was the daughter of a Manchu Prince. When she was very young, she was sent to live in the home of one of his Japanese supporters - Kawashima Naniwa. And then things get very, very murky. Kawashima Yoshiko wasn't averse to embellishing her life story, and it's hard to tell which of her exploits are true, and which are just tall tales. And yes, she had a lot of exploits - at one time, she was called "Commander Jin" and led her own troops. She also had an espionage career, although it's hard to tell what she actually did. And sadly, after World War II, she was tried as a traitor and executed by the Nationalist Government.

This book was a bit vague about timelines. While it does loosely follow chronological order, for the first few chapters, at least, the author looks at the different people who were in Kawashima Yoshiko's life to figure out what she was like, and what she did. So if you're not familiar with events of WWII in the Asia Pacific, you may get very confused by references to certain incidents.

While I would have preferred a more chronological account of her life, and a bit more explanation about that period of time, I can see why the author chose this method. Kawashima Yoshiko may have courted media attention, but her story changed to suit her needs. By talking to various people (or their descendants), the author managed to come somewhat close to truth.

For me, the interesting part of this story was in the discrepancy between how Kawashima Yoshiko saw herself and how others saw her. She was brought up to think her destiny involved restoring the Qing Dynasty to power, but to others, she was just a pawn for the Japanese (and indeed, she seemed to be very Japanese in certain aspects). She may have thought herself a Joan of Arc, but others saw her as a nuisance that should be eliminated. And in the end, she was done in by sensationalist novels about her. I find that tragic, that your life be ended by what the creative fiction that someone created about you. It just shows how hard it is to

discover who the real Kawashima Yoshiko was.

I would definitely recommend this book to people who are interested in WWII in the Asia Pacific. To avoid getting confused, you should have a basic knowledge about how the war broke up, how it went on, and how it ended, that way, you can focus on Kawashima Yoshiko instead of having to constantly look at timelines to see what was going on when and where.

Disclaimer: I got this book from the publisher via NetGalley for free in exchange for a free and honest review.

This review was first posted at With Love from Japan

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## **Chris says**

When I requested this book from Netgalley, I thought that I hadn't heard of Kawashima Yoshiko before. In this, I was wrong, as the book reminded me. I had seen her as a character in the movie *The Last Emperor*. She is the pilot.

This biography is far more detailed than that brief character.

Kawashima Yoshiko was a Manchu princess who was given by her father to a Japanese man who had aided the royal family. She returned to China during and after World War II, and, this is isn't really a spoiler, was shot by the Chinese government.

Birnbaum's book starts with Kawashima's death and then the chapters alternate between remembrances and myth, and Kawashima's life as shown by proven facts. It makes for an engrossing read, even if at the end of the book Kawashima Yoshiko still feels as elusive as ever.

It seems as if this is not Birnbaum's fault, for Kawashima had a tendency to embellish (if not outright lie) about some of her experiences. Additionally, Birnbaum is sorting through what appears to be self serving history on both the Japanese and Chinese sides. It is to Birnbaum's credit that while she does deal with the trauma and pain of Kawashima's life, she doesn't let her sympathy for her subject overwhelm the narrative or her judgment. Sympathetic the book is, but Birnbaum does not paint Kawashima as a victim or at least as solely as a victim. At times, it seems as Birnbaum finds her subject as annoying as those who actually knew the woman.

It is difficult if not impossible to psycho analyze a dead person, and Birnbaum does stay away from the temptation to do so. Therefore when she discusses the possible sexual abuse of Kawashima at the hands of her adopted father/guardian, Birnbaum cannot and does not provide a definitive answer. Birnbaum is on surer ground when discussing and examining how being a product of two cultures, distrustful if not always downright antagonistic too each other, affected Kawashima, resulting in her dissatisfaction of both and an admitted feeling of not quite belonging (another possible reason for the cross dressing, one does have to wonder).

The inclusion of Hiro Saga, a Japanese woman who married the brother of the Chinese Emperor, is both a positive and a negative to the book. It provides balance by showing a woman whose circumstances is alike but slightly different from Kawashima's. It allows the reader to place Kawashima's experiences in a broader and more cultural light. It also, however, at times, feels a bit like padding. Interesting padding, though one

wonders why Hiro Saga simply doesn't get her own book. (Don't worry, she does. She at least wrote and published her autobiography).

The other flaw, if flaw is the right word, is at times a more than passing knowledge of the battles fought as Japan attacked China would have been helpful. My understanding and knowledge of the Pacific Theatre, in particular the battles on mainland China, are rather limited, a bit more detail about certain battles and maneuvers would have been appreciated. That said, it doesn't limit the understanding of the text and sparks curiosity about the subject matter. Not a bad thing.

Hopefully Birnbaum's book will make the story of Kawashima more widely known in the West as well as the East.

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## **Lili says**

I received this book from Netgalley in exchange for a review:

History is an awesome and immensely frustrating thing, since most accounts of things are reliant on humans, and history is written by the winners...not to mention people like to embellish, well, the life of Kawashima Yoshiko is a prime example of that. We know her yet still know nothing about her, she was a fascinating person who still looms large in modern day myths, and how cool is that?

Like many people who probably wanted to read this book, I first learned of her from watching The Last Emperor, a much loved movie of mine, even if it is extremely tragic. Most of my study of Chinese and Japanese history is of the old stuff, but once in a while I dabble in more modern history. I figured reading a book about one of the most fascinating characters who swanned in and swanned out of the movie would be a treat.

And the author does a wonderful job of presenting an even, level headed story. This is no scathing biography tearing her apart, or a biography that puts her on a pedestal, it very much so tries to sift through the myths to show the real person.

The job is well done, especially considering how much of her life is a possible pile of fabricated nonsense written by Yoshiko herself! Was she really that epic, was she manipulated, was she just bonkers? We will never really know until we invent some machine that lets us watch past people's lives and know for ourselves.

I for one am thrilled that I read this book, I was able to learn more about a colorful person from a tumultuous time in both China and Japan's history.

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## **Denise says**

Interesting period in history, interesting character, disorganized book

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## Mandy says

I'd never heard of Yoshiko Kawashima before, a larger-than-life character whose almost unbelievable story was surely crying out for a good biography. On the whole author Phyllis Birnbaum does a pretty good job of assembling all the facts and sorting out the myths from the reality. Her research has been both detailed and meticulous and the inclusion of primary documents and many photographs into the narrative adds to its authority. A thoroughly enjoyable account of a thoroughly fascinating person.

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## Heidi Thomas says

Gave it the first 75 pages, and couldn't make it to 100. The book's intro/first chapters were too confusing. Wonderful idea but....maybe it will be a good read for you. Try it!

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## Hadrian says

It's astonishing that there ever was a person like Yoshiko Kawashima. Even though Birnbaum takes a historian's skepticism towards rumors and exaggerations, what's left is still a compelling and unusual story. The title says a lot, but still so much to add.

Yoshiko Kawashima was born in 1907, to a Prince Su of the ruling Aisin-Jioro family of the Qing Dynasty. She was named Xianyu then. A few years after the dynasty collapsed, her father brought her to Japan and placed her in the care of one of his colleagues, Naniwa Kawashima. She was educated as a Japanese student, and learned Japanese. Her adoptive fathers' house was a hotbed for Chinese nationalism and Japanese military adventurers (tairuku ronin). She grew up mindful of her past origins, and how the other schoolchildren called her 'chink'. It was also at this time when she started crossdressing.

There has been speculation that Kawashima was not just a crossdresser and may have been transgender, especially after she, in her own words, 'decided to cease being a woman forever', and had 'a tendency toward the third sex'. If she wasn't living in Japan in 1925 she would be able to explore these things. But she was soon swept up, along with millions of others, in the largest Asian war in history, and the Japanese political maneuverings to seize China. She would appear as a woman again, but often out of political expediency.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, she led a wild life of dancing, relationships with political and military leaders, and covert action. Most notably, she was involved in the Shanghai Incident of 1932, where Japanese troops and Chinese military police battled over that city. She had paid off Chinese workers at a towel factory to attack Japanese monks. She had also persuaded her relative, Puyi, to collaborate with the Japanese in forming their puppet state of Manchuria. This is the part you see in Bartolucci's movie [The Last Emperor](#), where she's the pilot in red leather.

In 1933, a novel was published about her life - *The Beauty in Men's Clothing*, by Muramatsu Shofu. It was an even more exaggerated story about her exploits, an exciting read, and a biographer's nightmare. Then it became impossible to separate myth from reality.

The picture of her on the cover was no glamour shot. She was a colonel-general in puppet Manchuria, and she did command a local militia in the invasion of Rehe, although she was only fond of it sometimes. She did

have some success, as her army crushed a dissenting warlord. She also was able to convince other former Qing royals - including Puyi's wife - to go to Manchuria. (The story of kidnapping the empress and stashing her in a car trunk is unverified.)

Yet for some reason, she no longer felt the same loyalty to Japan as she once did. She began to criticize the military brutality of the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. At this point, the Japanese had little use for her as an intelligence agent, and her health began to suffer.

At the end of the war, she was put on trial by the Nationalist Chinese government as a traitor against the Chinese people (??). Her fame made her a prime scapegoat, and she was even astonished to note that Shofu's novel was used as evidence.

She was executed in 1948, and rumors of her survival and escape sprung up immediately after. Even in death, she cannot be separated from the myths and stories about her.

Her historical legacy is conflicted. In Japan, she is viewed as a more sympathetic character due to her difficult upbringing and the loss of her family's power. Yet in China, she is still a traitor for working with the Japanese. This book disentangles the rumors from the truth, however obscure it might be.

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### **Relstuart says**

Interesting story but I kept moving on to other books while reading this one so it didn't keep my attention. Yoshiko was a Chinese princess who was given to an Japanese man to raise to help build ties between China and Japan. The insight into how Japan was trying to take over Manchuria during this time and the ideas popular in Japan about how they needed to help Asia out by taking control of things was interesting.

Yoshiko grew up to be a person with a lot of personal issues who used her position to become something of a minor celebrity. She worked with the Japanese as they conquered in China. While she spoke out against some of their injustices she ended up being tried and convicted of treason after Japan was defeated.

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### **Margaret Sankey says**

This is another biography that would be unbelievable if it was fiction--the daughter of a deposed Manchu aristocrat, raised in Japan by an abusive opportunist, married to the son of a Mongol warlord to cement Japanese ambitions establishing Manchuko, dashing cross-dressing 1920s bon vivant in Shanghai, eventually leader of an armed band promoted by Japan as a Joan of Arc answer to "lawlessness" and Chinese corruption until she crossed their plans. As you might imagine, Mao was not amused and had her executed (although rumors persisted that she escaped). Birnbaum recounts her struggle to wade through all of the memoirs, fictionalization, nationalist idealization, Communist demonization, values of the times and family animosity to reconstruct what was actually going on in a life that beggars belief.

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### **Christopher says**

I first discovered Kawashima Yoshiko/Jin Binhui when I was researching for a university essay I was writing

on state building-my topic was Manchukuo. I instantly realized that the more interesting tertiary character of the film 'The Last Emperor' who I had always assumed was fictional. This was a simplified and not entirely accurate portrayal of her. The Hong Kong film from 1990 which is named after her is actually a much more accurate view of this person in history-which is interesting because it seems on the surface the less believable of the two.

Naturally, obsessed as I am with all things Manchurian and Chinese frontier related, I took to this historical figure quite strongly. Unfortunately, English language sources always seemed scattered and mentioned Kawashima only in passing meaning my interest was only ever partially quenched for years.

Until now of course. Birnbaum expertly weaves between known and unknowns and always lets you know which is which with a critical eye. All while keeping one critical and one sympathetic eye on her subject.

I will save my personal response for The Manchurian Princess for a future blog post, but for now view this as both the quintessential book on Kawashima Yoshiko in English as well as one of the premier studies of the many facets of Japanese imperialism in the twentieth century.

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### **C. M. Dree says**

Good biographies leave you with the sense that their subject matter comes out diminished in the end. In this sense, this book is an excellent biography. It does focus a lot, too much if you ask me, on many other people who surrounded Yoshiko, instead of focusing on Yoshiko herself, and that's why it gets 4 stars.

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### **Beth says**

Yoshiko's story is of a strange a life. As one of many children in a royal Chinese family, she is undervalued and sent off to Japan to live as the child of a business friend of her father. So begins her confusion as she becomes of Japanese culture, forgets most of her Chinese language, and never seems to understand who she is. Is she female or male? Is she Chinese or Japanese when she feels contempt from each culture. Should she help the Japanese get Manchuria and run it or is she to help those of her clan get Manchuria and run it with the help of the Japanese. Why shouldn't she go to dance halls or take up with different men or women in her life? What clothing should she wear today, male or female silks? How can she con another man to support her? Did she really lead an army?

I began the story with no background in China/Japanese history relationships. Now I realize a little more than was shown in the movie "The last Emperor". I know a little more than I did about how Japan was trying to expand during World War II and about the effects of the Chinese revolution.

What I never got was a feeling of knowing or understanding Yoshiko.

I do feel frustrated that dates were not in order and various segments would crop up about years that I could not relate to parts I had already read, so I end up confused. On the other hand, I am willing to learn more of Chinese/Japanese history at a later date- just not more about this man/woman. But she sure was early in "coming out"!

