

Grant Hayter-Menzies. *Imperial Masquerade: The Legend of Princess Der Ling*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008. pp. xxviii + 389.

Inhabiting multiple cultural worlds was no novel thing to the Manchu Qing rulers, who routinely administered differing political and cultural policies among their Han Chinese, Tibetan, Muslim, and Mongolian subjects, not to mention the multitude of smaller hereditary local rulers in border zones. Board ministers and governors worked with colleagues from different backgrounds, and it is well known that the Qianlong Emperor opted to have himself represented in portraiture variously as a Confucian scholar, Daoist adept, Tibetan Buddhist Bodhisattva, patron of Islam, and Western science enthusiast. Foreign influence from without the empire was abundant also, becoming particularly prominent in the 1890s to 1910s, when Western technical and political ideas were borrowed to meet the crises of the empire's concluding decades. The court of the Empress Dowager Cixi was a key arena where reform, diplomacy, and modernization intersected, generating intense interest and controversy that fed into the existing large pool of rumours of palace intrigue.

Contemporary writers conveyed the fascination exerted by the court of this female ruler, and the complex changes underway during her rule through orientalist tropes, stressing Eastern exoticism and conservatism. For such writers, their representational authority was underscored by emphasizing the cultural gaps they had crossed, their ability to access this foreign court. Der Ling, the subject of this biography, was a member of this world, a writer who earned fame in the 1920s and 1930s through her portrayal of the Cixi court in this way to her Anglo-American readers, and who operated from the position of a double authority. She represented herself as a favoured lady-in-waiting, indeed a "princess," who rendered palace service to the Empress Dowager from 1903 to 1905, and also as a westerner-at-heart whose thinking and tastes were shaped for eighteen years by maternal

Eurasian ancestry, a Western-style upbringing, and stays in Tokyo and Paris while she accompanied her diplomat father on missions. But, as Grant Hayter-Menzies shows, her brief fame was a reflection of the fading glory of the “Celestial Empire” fantasized by westerners, described in her own sensationalist books catering to that fantasy but presented as intimate eye-witness accounts. One of the aims of this biography is to rekindle that public interest in Der Ling which has faded since her death in 1944, and it is as much concerned with her adaptive performance—her ability to shift her cultural and personal identity according to her environment—as it is with her writing on the life and character of the Dowager. Hayter-Menzies lets the subject “speak in her own voice,”(xxv) which means that the narrative quotes mostly from Der Ling’s own books and secondarily from contemporary Western observations. This is supplemented by contextualizing descriptions drawn from a short list of scholarly works and only one Chinese-language article translated for the author. While the author’s sympathetic approach is balanced on more than one occasion by cool-headed comments, with the last several chapters showing greater perceptiveness than the earlier ones, the book’s overall analysis could benefit from a more critical scrutiny of Der Ling’s self-representation of her character development, and from a more nuanced description of the Qing Chinese society in her times.

The book chronicles Der Ling’s life as a three-part story, reproducing her own explanation of her character development, which is effusively illustrated by many colourful details but quite simple in essence. The chapters in part one present Der Ling’s process of westernization. Most of the credit for this process is attributed to her father and herself, and only a little to her sister and her American-Chinese mother, Louisa Pierson, whom she seldom discussed in her books, and even less to Thaddeus Cohu White, her American husband who remained a shadowy figure, and none at all to her American grandfather, a Boston merchant in Shanghai who had a Chinese wife—possibly a common-law wife. Der Ling knew about this aspect of her own ancestry but never made it public. The author points out these omissions but, given the limitations of his sources,

provides little explanation for them. Following Der Ling, Hayter-Menzies credits her father, whom she adored, for guiding her through life's most important turning points with unfailing wisdom and understanding. Beyond providing Der Ling with a Western-style upbringing, he is said to have given wholehearted support to her pursuit of interests wholly contrary to social expectations, and offered her opportunities to meet dignitaries and artists, opportunities which Der Ling claimed to have utilized to the full with initiative and intelligence. As a result, she cultivated a modern cosmopolitan vantage point that stood her as equal to Western commentators on China. Father's support and daughter's giftedness also explain how Der Ling negotiated the other major episodes upon which she built her life-story. These included an incredibly daring refusal of a proposed marriage to the Guangxu Emperor's uncle by none less than the Empress Dowager Cixi, her ability to earn extraordinary favours with both the Dowager and the emperor, her refusal of marriage proposals from other prominent Manchus, and her decision to choose an American husband with whom to launch a publishing career in California. Little emerges in this one-sided account of how other people around Der Ling, including other family members and relatives, were involved in the process of her character growth. With the spotlight on her and her father, her sister, mother and other people who helped her along the way fade into the background, including her husband whose role in her books and activities could not have been minor but remains obscure. It is as if Der Ling single-handedly managed her ventures without complication, rivalry, or tension within her close circles. Readers of this 339-page biography may be left with a desire for more than short glimpses of Der Ling's relationships with her competitors and critics.

Part two is a synthesis of Der Ling's vignettes on the Empress Dowager Cixi, with details on the Dowager's personality, appearance, dress, routine, moods, meetings with foreigners, and palace décor. Even beyond the rumours and legends that surrounded these matters, the Dowager and her court still commanded intense public interest; Western popular audiences sought oriental exoticism, and Chinese

rumourmongers gathered fresh grist to grind. Scholars today continue to look for connections between imperial personality and policy. Hayter-Menzies generally affirms Der Ling's biographical authority, arguing that her portrayal of the Empress Dowager was intimate and rendered a needed service in humanizing this much vilified woman ruler, even though it contained details that were inaccurate and imagined. Various vignettes show the Dowager in different moods: chatty with Der Ling's mother about child raising and etiquette, accommodating and even charming at parties with foreign ladies, inquisitive about foreigners' impressions of her to the point of childishness, fascinated with her own photographic images, delighted among flowers and garden paths, demanding and ill-tempered when sick, self-pitying and lonely when grieving over her deceased husband, and depressed at news of disasters. The Dowager's attitude toward foreign customs comes through as curious, ambivalent, often puzzled and dismissive, but still reflective and not blindly xenophobic. Because little connection is made between the Dowager's personal life and the reforms and foreign policy of the later years of her rule, the book's strength in portraying the Dowager as an ordinary woman in extraordinary times is balanced by a corresponding weakness on her role as a powerful ruler. In comparison to the nuance and sympathy of Hayter-Menzies' treatment of the Dowager, Der Ling, and her father, the characterization of other people or groups in the book is often broad-stroked or sketchy with occasional comments that are curiously stereotypical or outdated. For example, most Qing officials are characterized as reactionary, most "Confucian" men as hateful of women, the general Chinese population as backward, missionaries as pushy, and Americans as gullible. More than a little of Der Ling's egocentrism may be reflected here, in that these large groups receive much less detailed attention in the book, often mentioned dismissively in passing.

Part three examines Der Ling's writing career in the Republican decades up until her death in 1944, focusing on her controversy with other westerners who wrote about the Cixi court, and her relief work for China during the war with Japan. While settled in Los Angeles with her American husband, safely away from turmoil and

unwanted marriage proposals in China from which she desperately sought escape, Der Ling now began to downplay her identity as a modern westerner and publicized herself as “Manchu,” “princess,” confidante of both the Empress Dowager Cixi and the Guangxu Emperor, and as a patriotic “Chinese” woman devoted to raising American awareness and funds for China’s wartime needs. Hayter-Menzies notes the irony and masquerade in these twists of identity; when Der Ling finally came to where she could fully be the westerner she always felt she was, she chose to invent attachments to a vanished Manchu world, to a Chinese republic with which she had little contact, and to the broader Chinese nation in which she always felt like an alien. Like Western rivals such as Edmund Backhouse, James O. P. Bland, Reginald Johnston and Katherine Carl, Der Ling tended to use frequent touches of orientalist romanticism to portray a China that never really existed. Yet she settled scores with these rivals in her books through emphatically “authentic,” realistic, authoritative descriptions of factual details about the Cixi court, to prove that she had been there and was an insider participant. Hayter-Menzies perceptively probes this competition over biographical authority, this need to appeal to the fancies of one’s constituencies, as key motivations in Der Ling’s identity shifts, and observes that she appeared strangely comfortable about juggling these different cultural worlds. Her ease may also be explained from another complementary perspective: given the multicultural, multiethnic milieu of the Qing world in general and its heady reformist last decades in particular, to inhabit several cultural worlds was a common experience for members of the Manchu elite, who did not necessarily see in it an inherent incompatibility. A wider understanding of the long processes of ethnic, cultural and religious mingling within the Qing empire, on which the book has little to say, will deflate Der Ling’s uniqueness but will deepen interest in her as a vocal member of a world that existed before nationalistic exclusivities had narrowed manoeuvring room, a subject about which scholarship is still relatively new.

The very short chapters are designed for easy reading, with the added visual interest of four dozen photographs and other images. On

matters of detail, there are more than a dozen technical errors, a few of which affect meaning: for instance, the state of California, rather than the city of San Francisco, is said to have been known as [Old] “Gold Mountain” to the Chinese.(297) Der Ling’s intention in using the title of princess is said to have been to “undermine” her own authority, when “underline” is meant.(244) More careful editing could have easily removed misspellings like “once” for “one,” (293) and “Chen Duxui” for “Chen Duxiu.”(378) These and other errors mar an otherwise quite readable book.

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