

The Story of Princess Yoshiko Kawashima, the Mata Hari of the East
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The first half of the 20th century was a turbulent time in human history, filled with unbelievable stories, and one of the most amazing ones - for better or for worse - is that of Yoshiko Kawashima, also known by her moniker: "The Eastern Mata Hari".



Born Chinese and dying self-proclaimed Japanese, this princess, spy, soldier, and gender non-conformist has become over the year a subject for both admiration and disdain. This is her story.

Asia's Most Infamous Spy

From the very beginning, Princess Yoshiko Kawashima was destined for something different. She was born a Chinese princess but sent to live in Japan after the Qing Dynasty fell and grew up as a cross-dressing spy, becoming a notorious icon in Asia during the second Sino-Japanese War.



lujuba.cc

As the years passed, Kawashima's reputation evolved from being an inspiring, romantic hero, to a treacherous traitor. She went from having adoring fans to inspiring a resentful reputation. Ultimately, Kawashima's life came to a screeching halt - yet her legend lives on.

Yoshiko Kawashima Was Born Into a Dying Empire

To understand the true spectacle of Kawashima's life, it's important to go back to the day that she was born, in 1907. Kawashima was born as one of 38 children to Prince Shanqi, with the name Aisin Gioro Xianyu. Her father was a Manchu prince related to the famous Qing Dynasty, the final imperial dynasty in China.



wikimedia.org

The Qing Dynasty rose to power in the 17th century, taking over land and conquering settlements. Their strong force of warriors and ambitious conquerors contributed to them overthrowing the Ming Dynasty, holding their place of leadership as the Manchurian emperors for 200 years. During this time, the nation had been prosperous, but its power was slowly slipping.

A Revolution Overthrows the Qing Dynasty

By the time that Kawashima was born, the Qing Dynasty's hold on the nation was loosening. In 1911, a nationalist reformer named Sun Yat-sen led an army of revolutionaries to strike while the iron was hot and overthrow the Qing Dynasty. Their efforts were a success, and the new powers established the Republic of China.



Wikimedia

While there were several casualties in the succession, the royal family was sneaked out of the nation - including little Aisin Gioro Xianyu. The young princess was sent to live with her father's Japanese friend, Naniwa Kawashima. Under her new guardian, she was rechristened with the name that would go down in history - Yoshiko Kawashima.

An Unconventional Princess in Exile

Needless to say, the first decade of Yoshiko Kawashima's life was very unusual, even for a princess. Living in exile, she was given a clean slate to make a name for herself, and she didn't hold anything back.



soha.vn

Rather than live as a stereotypical, delicate princess, Kawashima lived wild and started riding a horse to school. She progressively cut her hair into a buzz-cut, experimenting first with a stylish bob. Before long, she was even wearing men's clothing. Cross-dressing was unheard of in the conservative Japanese culture, yet Kawashima didn't care. Striving to embody a third gender, Kawashima said, "I decided to cease being a woman forever." The vivacious woman knew what she wanted to achieve in life, and she was focused on her goals.

Inspired by Joan of Arc

At the time, people had their role in society and didn't digress further from the cookie-cutter expectation placed on them. Kawashima should've held herself as a princess and married into a strategic partnership. However, she didn't want to be a bride. Instead, she wanted to be a warrior like the famous French heroine, Joan of Arc.



fotoe.com

From a young age, Kawashima had a passion for fighting. She even told her schoolmates, "If I had three thousand soldiers, I'd take China." Her guardian recognized Kawashima's burning desire to return to China and restore her family's glory, saying that she "aspires to be like that mannish Joan of Arc." Needless to say, deviating from the norm earned Kawashima a rather unusual reputation.

Earning a Scandalous Reputation

By the time that Kawashima entered her late teenage years, she was spending her time with multiple sexual exploits. Her enthusiasm for sex was an impropriety, and so were her many affairs. The fact that she was a Chinese princess living in Japan was enough of a scandal, and her frivolous behavior only added fuel to the fire.



mingrenw.cn

Eventually, her adopted father, Naniwa, arranged her marriage to the Mongol Prince Ganjuurjab, the son of a rebel leader that was connected with Kawashima's father. As you can imagine, Kawashima had different ideas. Before she could be forced into wedlock, she ran off to Shanghai which had earned a reputation for being "The Paris of the East and the New York of the West."

Finding a Way to Earn Her Keep

By 1931, Kawashima was in her mid-20s and living on her own. She had cut off any support that she previously had and was roaming around with no contacts, family, money, or employment. She simply drifted from dance halls to bars and casinos, living a life of debauchery. And then she got a phone call from the Japanese Kwantung Army.

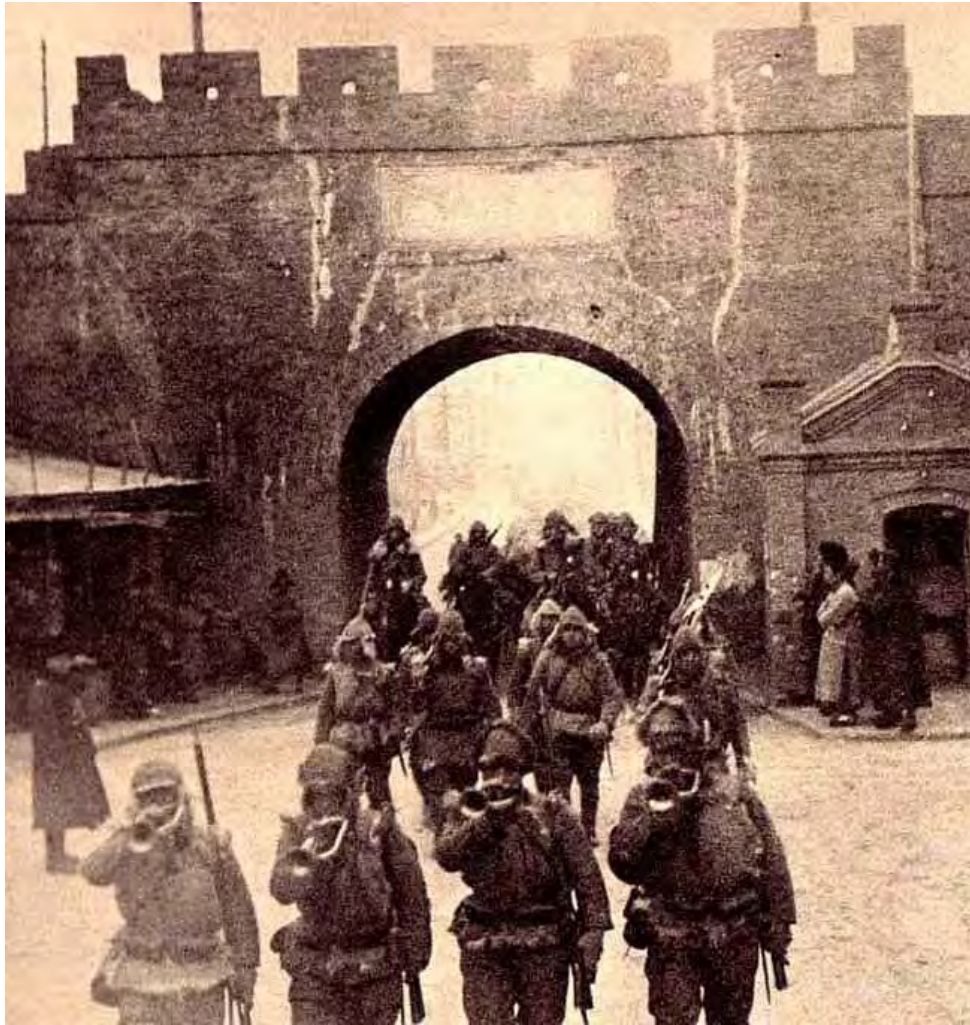


Daydaynews

The Asian region was rife with tension and the Japanese Army had their hearts set on Manchuria, hoping to claim it as the rightful possession of the Japanese Empire. Setting their plan into motion, the Japanese officers planted a bomb under the train tracks of a city on the outskirts of Shenyang. When the bomb went off, the Japanese accused the Chinese and used the excuse to invade northeastern China - and they would need an army!

Kawashima Becomes a Key Player

With a strong army, the Japanese were successful in their invasion, taking control of Manchuria. In order to hold their position, they attempted to legitimize their presence, and Kawashima was the perfect excuse. Leveraging Kawashima's Mongolian and Manchurian connections, the Japanese military intelligence thought that Kawashima was the perfect candidate to help strengthen their control.



alternatehistory.com

Putting her adventurous spirit and skill for disguise to use, Kawashima started working for General Kenji Doihara who was known as “Lawrence of Manchuria” after British officer T.E. Lawrence. While working in this position, Kawashima’s reputation would inflate further.

Setting up a Puppet State

In an effort to maintain control over the Manchurian area, the Japanese planned to establish a Manchurian puppet state to keep a legitimate front, without giving any decision-making power. In order to complete their plan, Kawashima was put to work.



granger.com

Kawashima persuaded the former Qing Emperor Puyi to become the ruler of the Manchukuo area. While the control that he held was largely a farce, Kawashima was thrilled that she had achieved her goal of restoring the Qing Dynasty to a seat of power. However, she wasn't going to stop there.

Igniting Unrest

Kawashima was a natural warrior and her thirst was barely quenched. At the time of the invasion, she was carrying out a years-long affair with a Japanese officer named Ryukichi Tanaka. The officer had been on the receiving end of pillow talk and knew of Kawashima's hopes and dreams.



storm.mg

According to Ryukichi, his lover planned to provoke violent unrest in Shanghai. In the winter of 1932, Kawashima laid the foundation of her work, paying workers around town to stage violent riots and fights. By doing so, the Japanese would have a reason to strengthen their position in China.

Kawashima Transforms Into a Dashing Soldier

The Manchurian area was rife with tension and there was a political struggle for control and power. Kawashima embraced the role of being a soldier in Manchukuo and she flourished.



chinadaily.com.cn

Instead of living as an elegant princess, Kawashima led a small army. She wasn't only in control of a few men, but several thousand irregular cavalry troopers. Their main goal was to suppress Chinese resistance fighters. The Japanese army realized the full potential that Kawashima held, and they took full advantage.

Transforming Into a Public Relations Figurehead

Japanese officials couldn't believe their luck when they realized that they could use Kawashima as an asset of war and they started grooming her as a public relations figure. As it turned out, her cross-dressing habits and spirited attitude empowered her reputation, but it wasn't always accurate.



unsplash.com

*By 1933, Kawashima even wrote a popular novel titled *The Beauty in Men's Clothing*. The story outlined fictional, exotic activities that blurred the boundaries of what was true and false. Regardless, it helped to build her fame and she started to appear on radio shows after returning to Japan. She even released an album of Mongolian folk songs!*

Creating an Anti-bandit Force

Kawashima was a powerful force to be reckoned with in the territorial struggle. She had garnered a large following and even developed a fan base. Most notably, she continued to lead the anti-bandit force.



tianjinexpats.com

The anti-bandit force consisted of approximately 5,000 soldiers. The main goal of the anti-bandit force was to protect Emperor Puyi. As long as he remained in power, then the Japanese had a puppet to run their operations. Yet while these efforts were raging, there was an internal struggle that Kawashima was experiencing.

Kawashima Had the Tricky Job of Managing Two Identities

On the surface, Kawashima appeared to be a fearless warrior who dominated any job that she tackled. Men and women simultaneously feared her and adored her, but there was a lot more than what met the eye.



Densho Digital Repository

Kawashima was born as a Chinese princess but grew into a Japanese hero. In some ways, the dual identity made her realize that nationality was a blurry line. She explained, “As commander, I have ventured out into the hail of gunfire a number of times, and indeed I have sustained three bullet wounds. But when I think about it, I see that, friend or foe, we are all brothers.”

Kawashima’s Reputation Started to Change

When the Japanese army first recruited Kawashima, she was a valuable asset as a spy and master of disguise. Her connections with the Qing Dynasty also proved to be incredibly valuable. However, her reputation grew to a notable level and her previous stealthiness was long gone.



historynet.com

By 1940, the fantastical figure of a horse-riding Manchu princess had dissipated. Her confidence had grown and she had developed a strong and loud opinion. Before long, Kawashima was leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of the Japanese military.

The Deterioration of the Princess's Reputation

Life as a war celebrity got the best of Kawashima and she found herself addicted to morphine and opium. Not only was she using drugs as a crutch, but she was also suffering from syphilis. Finding herself in a tricky situation, she continued on a dark trajectory and ran a blackmailing racket with the intention of extorting money from wealthy Chinese citizens.



The Diplomat

The Japanese officials had enough and Kawashima was placed under house arrest. Her life was in danger and rumor has it that General Hayao Tada, one of her many lovers, even attempted to kill her. By 1941, Kawashima was exhausted. She was alone in the world and only had her pet monkeys for company. She had no option but to return to Japanese-occupied Beijing where she lived out World War II.

Losing Money (And Momentum)

The Japanese army could only hold their position for a certain amount of time before the Chinese forces started to counter their efforts. While the resistance was heating up, Kawashima was running out of money. Any income that she had was spent on fueling her drug habit and bribing the military for protection.



Daydaynews

By August 1945, Soviet forces brought an end to the Japanese regime by invading Manchukuo and capturing Puyi. Within a few weeks, Chinese troops recaptured Beijing - where Yoshiko Kawashima was based!

A Race Traitor Charged With Treason

The Chinese princess had been working for the Japanese army and lost the hold that she had over her place of birth. When China recaptured Beijing, Kawashima was charged with treason. She was branded as a hanjian, also known as a race traitor, and prepared to be judged in a highly publicized trial.



The judges didn't have much evidence and so they turned to Kawashima's novel for more information as well as the sensational news reports that had covered her conquests over the years. However, these stories were highly inflammatory. While in prison, Kawashima speculated, "My whole life has been formed by false gossip about me and I will die because of false gossip against me."

The Death of the Princess

Kawashima's premonition was right. Based on the speculative accounts of her life, including the one that she wrote herself, Kawashima wasn't painted in a positive light. The Chinese citizens were outraged by Japanese brutality and demanded the death penalty for "the Mata Hari of the East."

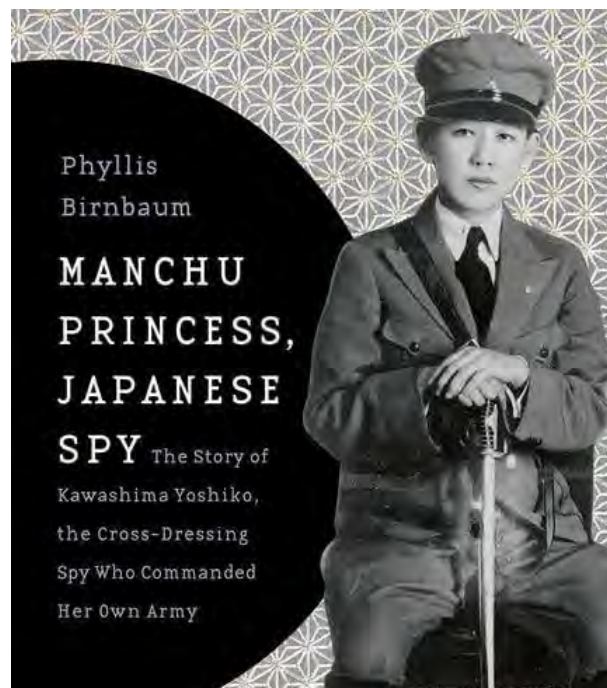


storm.mg

On March 25, 1948, Yoshiko Kawashimo's turbulent life came to an abrupt end. She was led to a frost-covered prison courtyard and was executed by a single shot in the back of her head. Princess Kawashimo died in a similar way to her mentor, Joan of Arc - execution at the hands of her enemies.

A Long-Lasting Reputation

Kawashimo was fairly young when she was killed, but she had lived the life of hundreds of men. Her charm and skill in disguise had boosted her value but would ultimately lead to her downfall. She will forever go down in history as an iconic figurehead.



The Japan Times

Despite the viral publication of her lifeless body after her execution, there are many that believe her drive for survival led to a secret escape. Some people claim to have seen her as late as 1978, climbing trees in Changchun.

Ultimately, Yoshiko Kawashima will always be remembered as the cross-dressing Princess that was a war leader.