

# Two Years in the Forbidden City

by

Princess Der Ling

First Lady In Waiting To the Empress Dowager



Illustrated from Photographs  
By the Princess Der Ling

With a New Foreword by Graham Earnshaw

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# Chapter I

## Introductory

MY father and mother, Lord and Lady Yü Keng, and family, together with our suite consisting of the First Secretary, Second Secretary, Naval and Military Attachés, Chancellors, their families, servants, etc., – altogether fifty-five people, – arrived in Shanghai on January 2, 1903, on the S.S. “Annam” from Paris, where for four years my father had been Chinese Minister. Our arrival was anything but pleasant, as the rain came down in torrents, and we had the greatest difficulty getting our numerous retinue landed and safely housed, not to mention the tons of baggage that had to be looked after. We had found from previous experience that none of our Legation people or servants could be depended upon to do anything when travelling, in consequence of which the entire charge devolved upon my mother, who was without doubt the genius of the party in arranging matters and straightening out difficulties.

When the launch from the steamer arrived at the jetty off the French Bund, we were met by the Shanghai Taotai (the highest official in the city), the Shanghai Magistrate and numerous other officials, all dressed in their official robes. The Taotai told my father that he had prepared the Tien Ho Gung (Temple of the Queen of Heaven) for us to reside in during our stay in Shanghai, but my father refused the offer, saying that he had telegraphed from Hong Kong and made all arrangements to go to the Hôtel des Colonies in the French Concession. We had had previous experience staying in this temple while on our way to Japan, where my father went as Minister in 1895, and did not care to try it a second time. The building is very old and very much out of re-

pair. It was a beautiful place in its prime, but had been allowed to go to rack and ruin. The custom is that the magistrate has to find a place and supply the food, etc., for high officials when passing through, and it is not exactly the thing to refuse their kind offer, but my father was always very independent and politely declined all proffers of assistance.

At last we did safely arrive in the *Hôtel des Colonies*, where my father found awaiting him two telegrams from the Imperial Palace. These telegrams ordered my father to go to Peking at once, but, as the river to Tientsin was frozen, it was out of the question for us to go by that route, and as my father was very old and quite ill at that time, in fact constantly under the doctor's care, the only accessible way, via Chinwangtao, was equally out of the question, as it was a long and most tedious journey and quite beyond his strength. In view of all these difficulties, he telegraphed that, after the ice had broken up in the Peiho River, we would come by the first steamer leaving Shanghai for Tientsin.

We left Shanghai on the 22d of February and arrived at Tientsin on the 26th, and, as before, were met by the Customs Taotai of the port and numerous other officials (the same as when we arrived at Shanghai).

There is a very curious custom of reverence, which must be performed by all high officials on their return from abroad. Immediately upon landing on the shores of China, arrangements are made with the nearest Viceroy or Governor to receive their obeisance to Ching Sheng An (to worship the Emperor of Peace), a Taotai being considered of too low a rank for such an honor. As soon as we arrived, Yuan Shih Kai, who was then Viceroy of Chihli Province at Tientsin, sent an official to my father to prepare the time and place for this function, which is an extremely pretty one. When arrangements had been made, both my father and Yuan Shih Kai dressed in their full ceremonial robes, which is the dragon long robe, with a reddish black three-quarter length coat over it, chao chu (amber beads), hat with peacock feather and red coral button, and repaired at once to the Wan Shou Kung (10,000

years palace), which is especially built for functions of this kind, where they were met by a large number of officials of the lower grades. At the back centre of this Temple, or Palace, stands a very long narrow table on which are placed the tablets of the Emperor and Empress Dowager, on which is written, "Wan sway, wan sway, wan wan sway" (10,000 years times 10,000 years times 10,000 10,000 years). The Viceroy, or in this case Yuan Shih Kai, and the other officials arrived first. Yuan stood at the left side of this table and the others arranged themselves in two diminishing lines starting from the front corners of the table. Soon afterward my father came and knelt directly in front of the centre of the table and said, "Ah ha Ching Sheng An" (Your servant gives you greeting). After this ceremony was over my father immediately arose and inquired after Their Majesties' health, and Yuan replied that they were quite well. This closed the function.

We stayed in Tientsin for three days, arriving in Peking on the twenty-ninth. My father's condition was much worse and he begged for four months' leave of absence, in which to recuperate, which was granted by Her Majesty, the Empress Dowager. As our beautiful mansion, which we had built and furnished just before leaving for Paris, was burned during the Boxer Rising of 1900, entailing a loss of over taels 100,000, we rented and moved into a Chinese house. Our old house was not entirely new. When we bought the place there was a very fine but old Chinese house, the palace of a Duke, standing on the ground, and by some clever re-arrangement and building on, it was transformed into a beautiful foreign style house with all the fine hardwood carving of the old house worked into it. By using the words "foreign style," it is meant that, in so far as the Chinese house could be made to look like a foreign house, without tearing it down entirely, it was changed, that is the doors and windows, passageways, furnishings, etc., were foreign, but the arrangement of the house itself and courtyard was Chinese. This, like all Chinese houses in Peking, was built in a very rambling fashion, and with the gardens, covered about ten acres of ground. We had just finished furnish-

ing it and moved in only four days when we left for Paris; and it has always been a great sorrow to my family that we should lose this magnificent place, after having spent so much time and money in building and beautifying it. However, this is only one of the many trials that a high official in China is called upon to bear.

The houses in Peking are built in a very rambling fashion, covering a large amount of ground, and our former house was no exception to the rule. It had sixteen small houses one story high, containing about 175 rooms, arranged in quadrangles facing the courtyard, which went to make up the whole; and so placed, that without having to actually go out of doors, you could go from one to the other by verandas built along the front and enclosed in glass. My reader will wonder what possible use we could make of all of these rooms; but what with our large family, numerous secretaries, Chinese writers, messengers, servants, mafoos (coachmen), and chair coolies, it was not a difficult task to use them.

The gardens surrounding the houses were arranged in the Chinese way, with small lakes, stocked with gold fish, and in which the beautiful lotus flower grew; crossed by bridges; large weeping willows along the banks; and many different varieties of flowers in prettily arranged flower beds, running along winding paths, which wound in and out between the lakes. At the time we left for Paris, in the month of June, 1899, the gardens were a solid mass of flowers and foliage, and much admired by all who saw them.

As we now had no place of our own in Peking we did not know where to go, so, while we were at Tientsin, my father telegraphed to one of his friends to find him a house. After some little trouble one was secured, and it turned out to be a very famous place indeed. It was the house where Li Hung Chang signed the treaties with the Foreign Powers after the Boxer Rising and also where he died. We were the first people to live there since the death of Li Hung Chang, as the Chinese people were

very superstitious and were afraid that, if they went there to live, something dreadful would happen to them. We soon made ourselves very comfortable, and while we lived there, none of the dreadful things happened to us that all of our good friends told us would be visited upon us if we dared to take this place. However, in view of our having lost our place by fire, I am inclined to think that their fears were well founded.

The loss sustained by having this house burned we never recovered, as my father, being an official of the Government, it would have been very bad form to have tried to recover this money, besides a possible loss of standing, as Government officials are supposed never to consider themselves or families in the service of their country, and any private losses in the service must be borne without complaint.

On the first of March, 1903, Prince Ching and his son, Prince Tsai Chen, came to see us and told us that Her Majesty wished to see my mother, my sister, and myself at once; that we should be at the Summer Palace (Wan Shou Shan) at six o'clock the following morning. My mother told Prince Ching that we had been wearing foreign clothes all these years, while abroad, and had no suitable Manchu clothes to wear. He replied that he had told Her Majesty all about us and also mentioned that he had seen us in European attire and she had said that it would not be necessary for us to wear Manchu costume to go to the Palace, that she would be glad to have us wear foreign clothes, as it would give her an opportunity to study the foreign way of dressing. Both my sister and myself had a very difficult time deciding what we should wear for this occasion; she wished to wear her pale blue velvet gown, as she thought that color suited her the best. My mother had always made us dress exactly alike, ever since we were little girls. I said that I preferred to wear my red velvet gown, as I had the idea it might please Her Majesty. After a long discussion I had my way. We had lovely red hats trimmed with plumes and the same color shoes, and stockings to match. My mother wore a lovely gown of sea green chiffon cloth embroi-

dered with pale mauve iris and trimmed with mauve velvet; she wore her large black velvet hat with long white plumes.

As we lived in the central part of the city and the only means of travel was by sedan chair and the distance from our house to the Palace was about thirty-six Chinese li (about 18km and a three-hour ride), we had to start at three o'clock in the morning, in order to be there at six. As this was our first visit to the Palace, Prince Ching's message threw us into a great state of excitement, and we were naturally anxious to look our best and to be there on time. It had been the dream of my life to go to the Palace and see what it was like, and up to this time I had never had an opportunity, as most of my life had been spent out of Peking, – in fact, out of China. Another reason why this chance had never come before was, that my father had never registered our names (my sister and myself) in the Government book for the registration of births of Manchu children, in consequence of which the Empress Dowager did not know until we came back from Paris that Lord Yü Keng had any daughters. My father told me the reason why he did not put our names in this book was, that he wished to give us the best education obtainable, and the only way he could do it was not to let the Empress Dowager know. Besides this, according to the Manchu custom, the daughters of all Manchu officials of the second rank and above, after reaching the age of fourteen years, should go to the Palace, in order that the Emperor may select them for secondary wives if he so desires, and my father had other plans and ambitions for us. It was in this way that the late Empress Dowager was selected by the Emperor Hsien Fêng.

We started at three o'clock that morning in total darkness riding in four coolie sedan chairs, one on each side of the chair. In going such a long distance it was necessary to have two relays of chair coolies. This meant twenty-four coolies for the three chairs, not counting an extra coolie for each chair who acted as a sort of head chair bearer. Besides this there were three military officers on horses, one for each chair and two servants riding at the back

of each chair. In addition there were three big Chinese carts following behind for the chair coolies to ride in and rest. This made a cavalcade consisting of forty-five men, nine horses and three carts.

I had a rather nervous feeling riding along in the chair surrounded by inky blackness, with nothing to relieve the stillness of the night but the rough voices of the chair bearers calling back and forth to each other to be careful of stones and holes in the road, which was very uneven, and the clump, clump of the horses. To my readers who have never had the experience of riding a long distance in a sedan chair I would say that it is a most uncomfortable conveyance, as you have to sit perfectly still and absolutely straight, otherwise the chair is liable to upset. This ride was a very long one and I felt quite stiff and tired by the time I reached the Palace gates.