

Christopher Bo Bramsen: *Generaldirektøren: Vilhelm Meyer - en dansk forretningsmands liv i Kina* (The Director General: Vilhelm Meyer - a Danish businessman's life in China). København: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1993. 381 pp.

Shanghai in the beginning of this century. A city cut in three parts, of which two were ruled by westerners: The French Concession and the Foreign Settlement. A city where the presence of internationally recognized businessmen and multinational firms were clearly revealed by the impressive buildings on the prestigious promenade, the Bund, along the shore of the Huangpu river.

It was the heyday of the Cathay Hotel and the Palace Hotel, two of the most spectacular hotels in the East (which later integrated and became the Peace Hotel). It was a time of long drinks in the afternoon, meetings in the foreign clubs, betting on the race courses, tennis matches with continuous flirtations, and a never ending stream of dances and parties. This was the place where a young man could easily lose his heart, spend too much money and devastate his future. But, also the place where he, if he possessed the right talents and ambitions, could gather tremendous wealth and fame. The biographer, the grandson of Vilhelm Meyer, presents a picture of a young man with these qualifications and ambitions.

Shanghai was the place Vilhelm Meyer set out for, when he left Denmark in 1902, and it was the place where he died thirty-three years later, only fifty-seven years old. Shanghai became the pivot of the entrepreneurial life of Vilhelm Meyer, one of the founders, and until his death the general manager, of the big Shanghai firm Andersen, Meyer & Co.

The book about Vilhelm Meyer is an eloquently written work that carries the reader on a journey through turbulent times, that in the

light of history seems covered by an aura of romanticism. The author (Permanent Secretary of the Danish Ministry of Industry) describes not only the life and deeds of his grandfather. He also depicts that far away world in which the grandfather built one of the biggest foreign companies, and together with his Danish wife, Kirsten, created a family.

Vilhelm Meyer went to Shanghai to work for the Danish East Asiatic Company, but after five months he was fired. He then got a job in the Sino-Russian Bank, where he stayed until 1905 where he set up the firm Andersen, Meyer & Co. together with two fellow countrymen. After three years Meyer was the sole owner of the company, but the original name was kept. The company's imports from Denmark were never very important. The imports of textiles from England, and machinery and electrical appliances from USA were the most important lines of business, and by 1911 the construction business had become the most important activity of A. M. & Co. The ties with the United States were quickly established and strengthened, so by 1914 the company became an American limited company with its business seat in New York. The company's activities spread all over China, but Shanghai remained the most important center. Vilhelm Meyer became the managing director and president of the limited company, but from this time on the company was American. As the firm grew, though, many Danes were still among the employees.

The book under review here is one of the most informative books about the Danish community and Danish business activities in Shanghai, in the first thirty-five years of this century. The author includes in his bibliography a wide variety of good sources on the topic, and due to the organized presentation of information from these, and the inclusion of hitherto unknown sources, the book must be considered a contribution to the literature in this field.

The greatest obstacle for the author has clearly been that very little written material by Vilhelm Meyer or his wife seems to exist. This might be why the physical whereabouts of the main characters tends to gain importance over their mental state. The author never gets really close to the Meyers. Reading the book leaves one with a picture of the life of Vilhelm Meyer, but not with an understanding of the person Vilhelm Meyer. It is stated repeatedly, though, that he

had flair for business, that he had a good voice and could easily have become an opera singer, that his daughters adored him, and that his wife always remained deeply in love with him. But one also gets the impression that he was a gambler, that was nearly bankrupt at times, and something of a womanizer. This line of thought is absolutely omitted from discussion by the author.

The biography is built up chronologically. The author's use of historically related events or experiences in this chronological order is very successful. In spite of the scarce quantity of available sources directly regarding Vilhelm Meyer, the biographer manages to tell a story, by combining information regarding the whereabouts of his grandfather with briefings on the historical context, and other peoples private experiences at the same place and/or time. This use of sources and the disposition of the book gives a varied and entertaining result. It is a book that will give people, who know little of the Danish experiences in China, and the Chinese history at the time, a possibility for getting to know Vilhelm Meyer's world, and simultaneously it brings some interesting unpublished sources to light.

Seen from a scholarly point of view though, the book has several flaws. The use of notes has been omitted, there are few references to the sources in the text, there are no analytical discussions about the findings, no questions raised, and occasionally one gets the impression that the sources have been approached fairly uncritically.

The author clearly wants to paint a glamorous picture of the family's exotic past and his grandfather's accomplishments. Hence the grandparents are rendered with a saint-like admiration, at the cost of a more full-fledged understanding of them as human beings. When this is said, it must be stated clearly, that the author succeeds in his objective. He is obviously captivated by the life and activities of the Danes in Shanghai and to some extent also other parts of China in the first part of this century. This makes him an excellent guide and his book well worth reading.

As is often the case with biographies though, one gets the impression that the biographer in his selections and descriptions

Reviews

reveals more about himself than those he writes about. Likewise this review might have said more about the reviewer than the reviewed.

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