

Unfolding the Forbidden City:
Princess Der Ling, Victor Segalen, and the Disclosure of “the Within”

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In this paper, I focus on Princess Der Ling (1886-1944), Victor Segalen (1878-1919), and their explorations of the Forbidden City in turn-of-the-century Beijing. Educated in Europe, Princess Der Ling, First Lady-in-Waiting to the Empress Dowager Cixi from 1903 to 1905, unveils invisible people, places, and things in the Forbidden City, and diagnoses the symptoms of the decline. From *Two Years in the Forbidden City* to *Son of Heaven*, Princess Der Ling’s official and unofficial history of the Forbidden City illustrates the strong tensions between imperial narrative and individual memory, between reliable history and consumable story. While the Forbidden City, “The Great Within,” in Der Ling’s narrative is the mythical, wondrous, and puzzling center of late Qing Empire, Victor Segalen embarks on his imaginary journey into the “horizontal wells” of the ancient capital, as well as into the fictional city underneath the Forbidden City, “the Within” of “The Great Within.” Victor Segalen is obsessed with pure difference and disparity in topography of exoticism, and in this regard, the Forbidden City and the fictional city beneath it are the incarnation of his unique “exoticism in space” evidenced in his *René Leys*. For Segalen, the mystery and exotic romance, and the abyss of the ancient capital shed new light on the reading, (productive) misreading, and fantasies of the imperial Forbidden City.