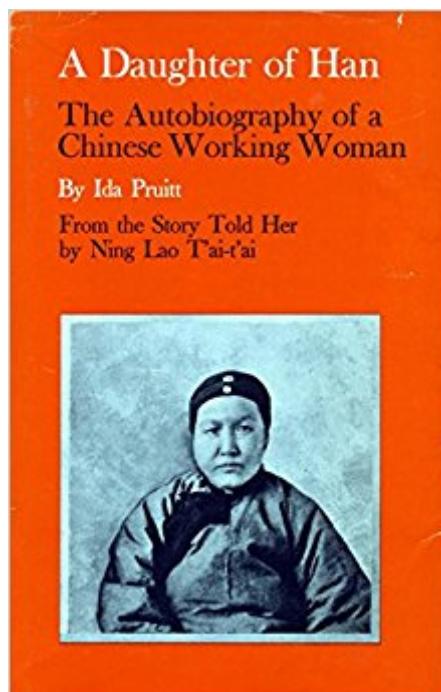


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A Daughter Of Han: The Autobiography Of A Chinese Working Woman



Synopsis

Within the common destiny is the individual destiny. So it is that through the telling of one Chinese peasant woman's life, a vivid vision of Chinese history and culture is illuminated. Over the course of two years, Ida Pruitt, a bicultural social worker, writer, and contributor to Sino-American understanding, visited with Ning Lao T'ai-ta'i, three times a week for breakfast. These meetings, originally intended to elucidate for Pruitt traditional Chinese family customs of which Lao T'ai-ta'i possessed some insight, became the foundation for an enduring friendship. As Lao T'ai-ta'i described the cultural customs of her family, and of the broader community of which they were a part, she invoked episodes from her own personal history to illustrate these customs, until eventually the whole of her life lay open before her new confidante. Pruitt documented this story, casting light not only onto Lao T'ai-ta'i's own biography, but onto the character of life for the common man of China, writ large. The final product is a portrayal of China that is "vividly and humanly revealed."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A Daughter of Han" is both an insightful and a frustrating read. The author, Ida Pruitt, writes in the first-person from the perspective of Lao T'ai-ta'i, a woman Pruitt met and interviewed. There are several interesting themes in the book: conservative society, saving face, foreign missionaries, poverty, numerology, and domestic life. Each chapter presents a few years in Lao T'ai-ta'i's life. She describes her childhood, her marriage to an "opium sot," her husband trying to sell her daughters, and her working life. Lao T'ai-ta'i's life is terribly difficult. She and her children go through periods of

hunger that force them onto the street. She sees children and grandchildren die, which Pruitt barely mentions in passing. Unfortunately, the book is somewhat scant on specifics and details. At various times she works as a domestic servant for a Muslim family, a mandarin bureaucrat, and different missionaries, but we never learn how exactly she serves the families or how she makes house-calls as an itinerant vendor. In addition, events just come and go with very little reflection or detail, such as deaths in her family or friends that she mentions with no specifics. I would be curious to know about how funerals were held, what she did with her friends, or even what the cities she lived in were like. Sometimes, the scant details work in favor of the narrative. For instance, there is a brief sentence that describes seeing some of supporters of the Boxer Rebellion in her city. For her, a woman more interested in getting by than paying attention to politics, this would be a realistic description. The narrative style is a little dated, even for a book written in the '30s or '40s.

History is, ultimately, the story of people and their relations, whether peaceful, characterized by the worst violence and gore, or the myriad of grays in between. The "Great Man" historians offer a lot of the peoples' story, through the words of the great leaders and their actions and reactions to the people and society they helped lead, and for that reason I'd never discount "Great Man" histories and still read them. But I've learned the best way to figure out the story of a people is from the horse's mouth, reading the narratives of the people of that time and place and learning from that common, everyday person the rhythms of that past culture, how the society functioned, etc. etc. This story of a Chinese working woman as told by the woman herself is an excellent example of such a narrative, a great and sweeping social history of China's working majority. This is social history at its finest--or perhaps, since it was first published in the '30s, a proto-social history that served as a crucial model for every social historian that followed. "Daughter of Han" is an intimate portrait, not only of a woman's long, rich life and experiences, but also a rare glimpse of a late Imperial China in the throes of dynastic decline, foreign aggression, and, eventually, revolutionary social and political change. Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai (roughly equivalent to "old lady Ning" or "granny Ning" in English) began, and spent the bulk of her life, in Penglai, a port city in Shandong province, and a culture wedded to tradition. Nowhere was tradition more strictly upheld than in Shandong, which, being the birthplace of Confucius and the home of the Temple of Confucius in Qufu, was the epicenter of traditional Confucianism.

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