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Review of China’s American Daughter: Ida Pruitt (1888-1985) by Marjorie King

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(review)

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5. Unlike Jia, I have translated you as “obtain” rather than “exist” or “existence” to better capture the senses of both “being” and “having” carried by the Chinese term, and to suggest a shift away from the ontology of individual beings implied by Western discourses on existence and toward a relational ontology more compatible with both classical Chinese thought and Buddhism.


Ida Pruitt’s book *Daughter of Han* has been a bestseller for Stanford University Press since it was issued in paperback in 1967. Its first-person account of an ordinary Chinese woman’s travails in late Qing and republican-era China has made it a favorite for instructors of survey-level classes, whose orders have kept the book continuously in print for forty years. Countless students suffered with Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai, the fiftyish domestic servant whose story is told in the book, when her “opium sot” of a husband sold their daughter—not once, but twice—to satisfy his drug addiction. This daughter, named Mantze, ends up married to another opium addict, who abandons her. Just as compelling is the story of Su Teh, Mantze’s daughter, who rises above the poverty of her birth to study abroad in the United States, work as a college professor upon her return to China, and remain an unmarried, patriotic Chinese woman who strives to build a new China. Episodes such as these make the book a superb resource for a wide range of classes. Through the book, Pruitt thus remains one of the most important English-language interpreters of everyday life in China in the first half of the twentieth century.

Marjorie King’s *China’s American Daughter: Ida Pruitt (1888–1985)* makes the case that Pruitt’s significance extends beyond her role as skillful raconteur of Ning’s story. King places Pruitt’s life in the context of China’s twentieth-century history and the history of Sino-American relations as a mediator between cultures and governments. The book is organized chronologically into a dozen chapters and includes twenty-five black-and-white photographs that span the near-century of her life. Pruitt was born in Shandong to Southern Baptist missionary parents. She lived nearly fifty years in China and considered it her true home, her motherland. Chapters survey her role as a founder of medical social work in China, her work as a fiction and nonfiction author, her fundraising efforts on behalf of cooperatives in China, her collaboration with Lao She on the English translation
of *Four Generations under One Roof* (*Si shi tong tang* 四世同堂), and her deep bond with left-wing China friend and organizer Rewi Alley.

Overall, this accounting of Pruitt's life provides the most historical and narrative depth in the chapters on the late 1930s and 1940s. Paradoxically, Pruitt spent a good part of these years in the United States, a country in which she did not feel very much at home. In these chapters, one gets an insider’s account of the organizational and political struggles of the Chinese Industrial Cooperative (CIC) movement. Pruitt’s effort to build grassroots, nonpartisan support for light industrial cooperatives that produced things like steel tools, candles, and knitted textiles was thwarted by the interests and individuals of both the Guomindang and the U.S. governments. One way to make this story more compelling would be to situate it more firmly within the historiography of Sino-American relations during these years. The narrative of Pruitt’s childhood in the late nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth century, including her twelve-year-old’s perspective on the North China-centered Boxer Rebellion, is comparatively thin, which is due mainly to the author’s careful reliance on archival sources. We learn more about Anna Pruitt in these decades, Ida’s mother, and their complicated relationship.

The book is based on meticulous, decades-long study of Pruitt’s personal papers, her publications, interviews with Pruitt herself, more than twenty other interviews with her acquaintances, materials from seven archives, and even her FBI dossier. It is, quite simply, a formidably researched book. King weaves this wide range of materials together in a way that makes for a somewhat idiosyncratic narrative at times. On a single page, for example, we read about Pruitt’s professional endeavors but also a paragraph-long description of a dream that she had that conveyed her personal loneliness at the time (p. 179).

We do learn more about Ning Lao T’ai-t’ai and her family in the book in two separate chapters. King relates, for example that Ning’s granddaughter Su Teh, who is headed off to support the Communist guerillas at the end of *Daughter of Han*, died from a typhus infection. We learn more about the role that Pruitt had played in Su Teh’s education in China and in the United States. One might quibble with the editorial decisions that split the section on Ning into two chapters. In chapter 1, which describes Ida’s first years in Penglai, the section on attitudes toward sexuality is introduced abruptly and might have been better placed in a chapter that dealt with Pruitt’s adult relationships with men. A more careful copyediting should have caught the misspelling of Southern Baptist Armenian theology (p. 17) and the use of meters to measure the elevation of one town and feet to measure elevation of another town two pages later (p. 157 and p. 159, respectively).

Overall, the author’s sources and narrative are most successful at placing Ida Pruitt in a personal, psychological framework, or a framework of cross-cultural or bicultural identity. Scholars in fields like cross-cultural communication will see Pruitt as a case study of “inbetweeness,” a person who can navigate two cultures with native ease, but yet who is not truly at home in either. She claimed,
for example, to be most comfortable in Chinese culture, but rather than settle in Taiwan or Hong Kong when the Communist revolution succeeded, she chose to live in Philadelphia for reasons that were not stated or analyzed. In another episode, Pruitt realized at about age fifty that her sense of self in China was intimately tied up with the power relations of colonialism in a way that she had not previously grasped. The book makes clear that Pruitt was a conflicted figure in this and in other ways. The sense in which her writings and perspective were forerunners to post-colonialist thought is a thread that the author intriguingly introduced midway through the book but could have developed more fully. The book will thus find a most appreciative audience among anthropologists or students of bicultural identity.

In sum, the book does not make a strong case that Pruitt’s life helps us understand modern Chinese history or Sino-American relations. Rather its strength is its vivid portrait of a bicultural woman navigating the personal, social, and cultural structures of a period of rapid change in both her place of birth and in the United States. Scholars of gender, identity, and ethnicity will, therefore, likely find King’s careful and caring description of Ida Pruitt’s life a useful addition to our knowledge of these categories of experience in colonial and post-colonial settings.

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