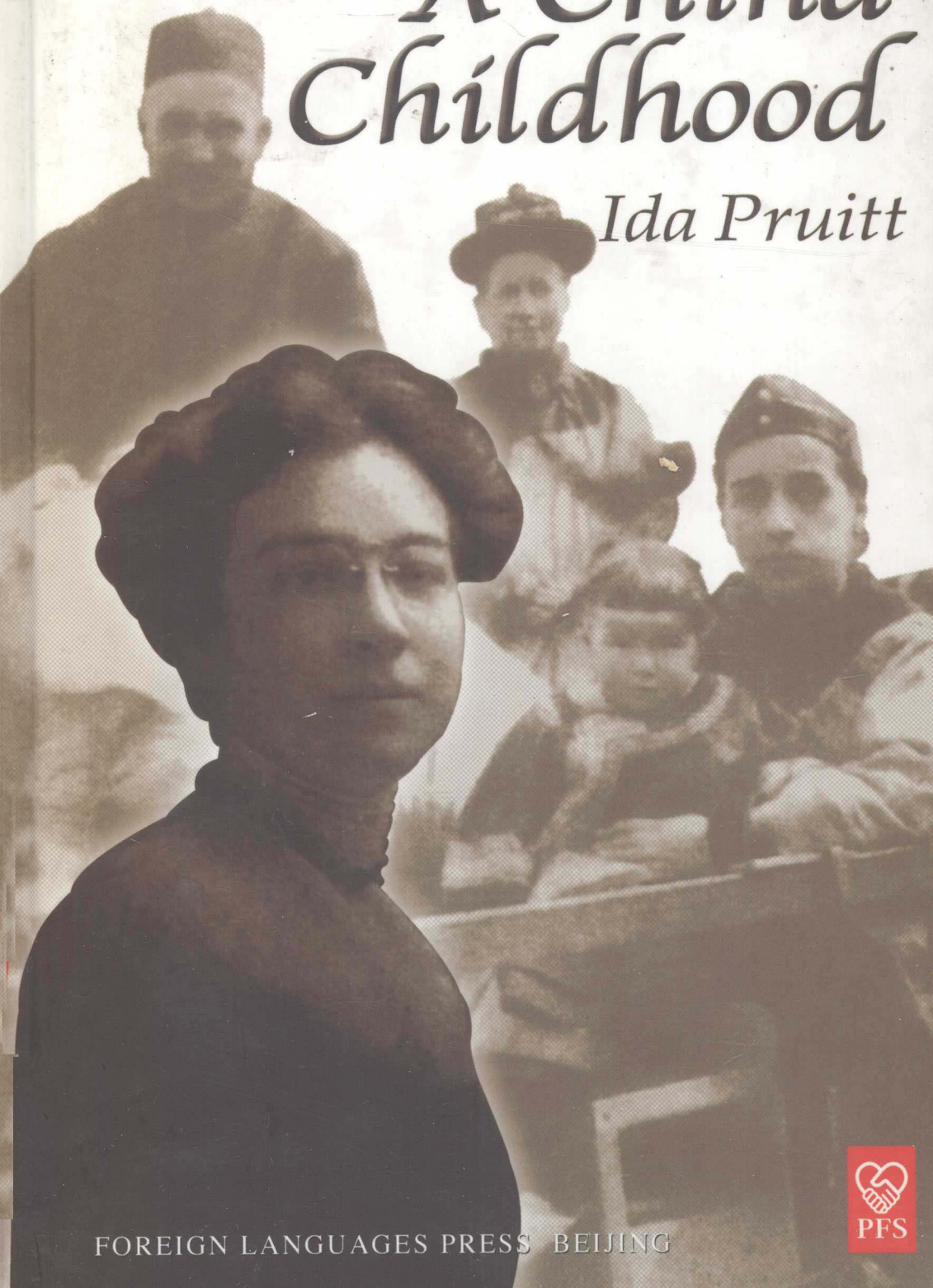


A China Childhood

Ida Pruitt



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A CHINA CHILDHOOD

by
Ida Pruitt

with a foreword by
John K. Fairbank

Foreign Languages Press

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PREFACE

Huang Hua

It is a great honor for me to write a preface for the new, PFS (China Society for People's Friendship Studies) 50-book series under the general title of *Light on China*. All these books were written in English by journalistic and other eyewitnesses of the events described. I have read many of them over the seven decades since my student days at Yenching University. With some of the outstanding authors in this series I have ties of personal friendship, mutual regard, and warm memories dating from before the Chinese people's Liberation in 1949.

Looking back and forward, I am convinced that China is pursuing the right course in building a strong and prosperous country in a rapidly changing world with its complex and sometimes volatile developments.

The books in this series cover a span of some 150 years, from the mid 19th to the early 21st century. The numerous events in China, the sufferings and struggles of the Chinese people, their history and culture, and their dreams and aspirations were written by

foreign observers animated by the spirit of friendship, equality and cooperation. Owing to copyright matters and other difficulties, not all eligible books have as yet been included.

The founder of the first Chinese republic, Dr. Sun Yat-sen wrote in his Testament in 1925, “For forty years I have devoted myself to the cause of the people’s revolution with but one end in view: the elevation of China to a position of freedom and equality among the nations. My experiences during those forty years have convinced me that to attain this goal we must bring about an awakening of our own people and ally ourselves in common struggle with those people of the world who regard us as equals.”

Chairman Mao Zedong declared, at the triumphal founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, “The Chinese people have stood up.” Today, having passed its 53rd anniversary, we see the vast forward strides that have been taken, and note that many more remain to be made.

Many foreign observers have traced and reported the real historical movement of modern China, that is: from humiliation — through struggle — to victory. Seeking understanding and friendship with the Chinese people, their insight and perspective were in basic harmony with the real developments in China. But there have been others who viewed China and the Chinese people through glasses tinted by hostile prejudice or ignorance and have invariably made irrelevant observations that could not stand the test of time. This needs to be better understood by young people and students, at home and abroad. The PFS series *Light on China* can help them gain an overview of what went before, is happening now, and will

emerge in the future.

Young students in China can additionally benefit from these works by seeing how foreign journalists and authors use fluent English to record and present historical, philosophical, and socio-political issues and choices in China. For millions of students in China, English has become a compulsory second language. These texts will also have many-sided usefulness in conveying knowledge of our country to other peoples.

Students abroad, on their part, may be helped by the example of warm, direct accounts and impressions of China presented by their elders in the language that most readily reaches them.

Above all, this timely and needed series should help build bridges of friendship and mutual understanding. Good books long out of print will be brought back to strengthen the edifice.

My hearty thanks and congratulations go first to ex-Premier Zhu Rongji, who has been an effective supporter of this new, PFS series. They go to all engaged in this worthy project, the Foreign Languages Press, our China Society for People's Friendship Studies, and others who have given their efforts and cooperation.

Chairman Mao Zedong has written: "So many deeds cry out to be done, and always urgently. The world rolls on, time presses. Ten thousand years are too long. Seize the day, seize the hour."

The hour has come for making these books available to young people in China and abroad whose destiny is to build a better world together. Let this series add a small brick to that structure.

Beijing, Autumn 2003

ILLUSTRATIONS

(*facing p. 64*)

The Pruitt Family Compound (*front endpaper*)

1. Author's father, C. W. Pruitt, in his twenties (sometime in the 1880's)
2. Father's teacher
3. Father's teacher's wife, who bore fifteen children and raised five
4. Chao Teh-shan, the herd boy who became an official
5. Author and brother riding in baskets on a donkey
6. Mule-litter—usual mode of travel for any distance
7. The family starting to P'eng-lai

Rough Sketch of Sung-chia-tan Village (*rear endpaper*)

FOREWORD

THIS ENTRANCING STORY IS deceptively simple. A little American girl, daughter of missionaries, grows up in a Chinese village in Shantung province not far from the Yellow Sea. The time is late in the nineteenth century. The narrator shows you every detail of the household and its people—the orderly architectural layout of the compound and its several courtyards, the adjustments made by the foreign family living conscientiously in Chinese style, the way they and their servants perform their various roles. With her Chinese nurse, a peasant woman, the little girl explores the carefully structured life around her in the compound. Growing older, she ventures out into the village and eventually into the countryside.

Suddenly one realizes that this concrete, bit-by-bit narrative has taken one across a cultural gap into another way of life that is now gone, that of old China. Up to the age of twelve when her story stops, the little girl has grown up more Chinese than American. She has learned to see the world through the eyes of the nurse and of the Chinese community around her.

Very early, for example, she becomes aware of her parents' intrusive foreignness as they try to Christianize their Chinese neighbors. Moving into this ancient Chinese house, they take out the latticework and substitute "aggressive vertical windows of the West The paper that had covered the lattice, that had let in the soft light and kept out the heat and the cold and people's vision, was replaced with glass, hard and cold, that had to be defended with curtains." Her American parents also rearranged the furniture but, says the little girl, "I never felt comfortable with the arrangement of the

room The Chinese way would have been much more formal.” Within the high compound walls, her mother felt “caged, confined,” but for the daughter they provided “dignity, formality, and privacy.” Later she found that “the roofs in America had no dignity and often the rooms were not of harmonious dimensions.”

The Hall of the Ancestors in this ancient house was naturally converted by the missionaries into their church. The little girl saw it as a mutilation. In one corner of the courtyard they had dug a hole to make a baptistry which could be filled with water. “When dry the hole was ugly and gaping I did not like to look at that hole. Even the thought of it hurt me Father’s face would be beautiful as he raised a new member, symbolically, from death to life. To me, however, it was a grotesque and somewhat indecent ceremony, performed in a pit that had broken the harmony of the court.”

Baptism in her eyes was merely initiation into the club, for the little girl soon realized that the Chinese communicants “thought of the church as a club. The Chinese word chosen by the early missionaries was *hui*, club, organization, assembly. The Baptists were the *Chin Hsin Hui*, the Club of the Immersed Believers.... The nearest analogy to church membership was the trade guild and the secret society.”

The narrator is Ida Pruitt, who grew up in a village near the town of P’eng-lai in Shantung. Later she went to a girls’ school in Georgia and to Teachers College at Columbia and eventually into social work in Philadelphia and later at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. There she worked with a pioneer of hospital social service, Ida M. Cannon. Returning to her native China, Miss Pruitt became head of the Hospital Social Service Department in the Peking Union Medical College. For twenty years, until the Japanese invasion of 1937-38, she put her training in this new field to use in dealing with the manifold social problems of the patients at this great Rockefeller-supported hospital.

Speaking Chinese with her native Shantung accent, instinctively aware of the nuances of Chinese behavior, Miss Pruitt became a unique interpreter of Chinese life, sought after by sinologists and social investigators. The book

by Olga Lang, *Chinese Family and Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), owed much to her detailed case files. Confronting people's day-to-day problems, she developed an interest in the written record of everyday life in China. In 1936 she published a translation of a vivid story, *The Flight of an Empress, told by Wu Yung, whose other name is Yü-ch'uan, transcribed by Liu K'un* (Yale University Press, 1936), a valuable first-person account of how a local magistrate met the Boxer year and its aftermath. During two years in Peking she also had long conversations three times a week with an old lady from her native P'eng-lai, a peasant grandmother who had seen the gamut of hardship in her time. The resulting volume was *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman, from the story told her by Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai* (Yale University Press, 1945), a unique contribution to our understanding of the personal vicissitudes of Chinese life in the late nineteenth century.

More than most Westerners who have lived there, Ida Pruitt left her heart in Peking. Her attachment to China is deeply inbred. It relates to the whole balance of life, the values, satisfactions, and restraints of the ordered Confucian society. This is why her story of the colors and textures, the discoveries and attachments of childhood, give us such insight into a culture now hidden by time and distance.

John K. Fairbank

PREFACE

“OF THE MAKING OF many books there is no end” was said ages ago by a man long considered wise. That I should add to the spate daily coming off our presses seemed to me an unnecessary occupation. Two considerations changed my mind. Now that so many people are called upon to live in two or even more ways of life at the same time, it seemed to me that perhaps my childhood, lived in two very distinct patterns, would be of interest. And second, the old China in which I spent my childhood is no more. That its old ways may be of interest to students and even others I felt possible. Although the old ways have passed into history, the basic character of the people is still there: their independence (some call it the stubbornness of the peasant), their sense of fair play, their never-ending diligence, their sense of rhythm and harmony, and their dignity.

IDA PRUITT

CONTENTS

<i>Illustrations</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Foreword by John K. Fairbank</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xvii</i>
1. In the Beginning	1
2. A House is an Outer Self	4
3. The House of the Women	7
4. Dada Takes Us Out for an Airing	13
5. The Hall of the Ancestors	21
6. The House of Those Who Must Also be Cared For	33
7. The Back of the Compound	39
8. Dada and Her Family	51
9. Outside the Great Front Gate	65
10. Outside the Great Back Gate	79

11. The Neighbors Come to Us	93
12. The Japanese War: 1894-1895	101
13. The People of Our Village	107
14. The Long Haired Ones	121
15. We Range Further Abroad	129
16. Into the Hills	138
17. Further Shores	147

1

IN THE BEGINNING

THE LITTLE GIRL LEANED against the pole of the mule litter at rest in a Chinese courtyard. When the litter was slung on the backs of the mules the poles rode chest high to a man but were not more than a foot and a half above the ground when the frames that went over the wooden saddles straddled on the ground. The little girl leaning against the pole could not have been more than a year and some months old, a year and a half.

She pulled her hand along the pole. A roughness in the surface pricked her finger and hurt her. She looked at the pole and felt again its hardness and roughness. She looked at the finger and at the scratch and looked again at the pole which had hurt her. It was hard and alien. "This is not me," she thought with surprise.

She lifted her head and looked out into the courtyard. Huge blue figures loomed and moved and were unfocused shapes in the distance that meant nothing. More "not me." How much "not me" there was.

The rest of her life was to be spent in learning about "me" and "not me," in trying to understand them both in ever widening circles—of experience, of thought, and of understanding, widening ever outward like the circles curving away from a stone dropped into a pond. Not only, however, was the "me" and the "not me" to be sorted out. There were also for the little girl the pat-

terns of two very dissimilar ways of life from which to choose her habits and her thoughts. Perhaps it was not to choose between them, but to take something from each.

Why was this child with brown hair, green eyes, and a fair complexion, obviously of Western European ancestry, dressed as a Chinese, her hair combed into two straight braids that stood out from either side of her head? Why was she pricking herself into consciousness of life outside herself, the knowledge that she was not the universe or even the center of it, as she leaned against the pole of a mule litter in a Chinese courtyard? The answer lay with her parents who had followed the urge that had been with the people of Western Europe ever since the dawn of history, the urge to go West and ever further West. A farm boy in North Georgia heard a returned missionary tell about the "heathen Chinese" and hellfire. Dimly, through the exhortations of the missionary, the tales of poverty, disease, and corruption, he had glimpsed the beauty of the Chinese people and their culture, which he was to see, understand, and to love, and he knew that these people must not be left to hellfire. Hellfire was very real in North Georgia in those days. The boy had his call to the ministry and went to China in 1882 (one of the first to cross the country by rail and sail from San Francisco instead of going around the Horn), a missionary of the Southern Baptist Convention.

A young woman in Ohio, teaching school in California in 1887, read the letters from a cousin preaching the Gospel in a Presbyterian Mission in Peng-lai, Shantung Province, in North China, and thought that was the place to take her restless soul. One morning, in P'eng-lai, as she was studying the Chinese language, as all new missionaries must, she answered the doorbell. There stood a blue-eyed Chinese. The clothes, the long blue gown, and the short sleeveless black jacket were Chinese, even the shaven head which meant he had a queue, the round melon-section skull cap, and the black cloth shoes; but the eyes were blue, more blue than any eyes she had ever seen, and the mustache had a hint of bronze in it. Then she knew. He was the widower from the Baptist Mission who had been "out in the field" when she had arrived.

In three months they were married. They moved from P'eng-lai, in the

prefecture of Tengchow, where there were several families of missionaries, to the village of Sung-chia-tan in the Huang-hsien district, where for most of these years they were the only Westerners. The little girl was born, however, in P'eng-lai, within the walled city, in the house where her father had lived his first six years in China. There was no Western trained physician in Huang District and it did not seem sensible for the one busy doctor in P'eng-lai to leave his patients for a woman to begin labor.

So it was that the little girl was born in a Chinese house, in a Chinese compound, in a Chinese city, the walls of which had first been laid down in the time of the first emperor of the Ch'in Dynasty, two hundred years before Christ, and which had been an imperial city (as the triple-roofed gate towers testified) in the time of Yang Ti of the Sui Dynasty, in the seventh century A.D. When she was a month old, they took her back to Huang District and when she was a hundred days old they gave her the "Hundred-Year-Old" birthday party usually given only to boys. Her parents wanted to show that in Christian countries girls were as precious as boys. They knew that in this old civilization of farmers and artisans the son was the only hope for support in sickness and old age and in the life to come, and that daughters, married off to other families, took with them all that had been invested in them. But ancestor worship was wrong, the parents believed, and women should learn skills and be able to work as well as men. The parents belonged to the world of the industrial revolution. Furthermore, they did not admit to themselves that in their own country also a man child was more desired, usually, than a girl. All the church members came to the party and put around the little girl's neck a silver chain with a heavy silver lock such as was given boys to lock them to this world. But the little girl never remembers seeing it. It probably found its way to some missionary society in an American church.

2

A HOUSE IS AN OUTER SELF

AFTER THAT EARLIEST MEMORY, as I stood beside the mule litter in the farm courtyard, there is no single memory in my mind until my sixth year. Throughout those first years, however, there was etched on my mind, line upon line, laid in my heart, layer upon layer, painted in my heart and in my mind, brush stroke after brush stroke, that compound where we lived and the people in it and the people who came to it. This was my world.

A house is an outermost covering, more permanent than the clothes we wear and more permanent to the Chinese families of that time, who lived for generations in one house, than the flesh and bones of their bodies. One would be naked without a house. Chinese stories of life in the past centuries often start with the story of the house in which the people lived, and the relationship of the people to that house. Therefore, as I was born in the last century and lived in a Chinese house, that house and my relationship to it and to the people in it and those who came to it must first be described.

We lived in a compound made up of seven courtyards and the eleven one-story houses of those courtyards. The main house of a courtyard was always on the north side and faced south to get the life-giving sunshine. The smaller houses were sometimes against the east wall and sometimes against the west wall. This left the courtyard space as solid a whole as possible. A