

Old Madam Yin

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A MEMOIR OF PEKING LIFE
1926-1938

Ida Pruitt



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INTRODUCTION

By Margery Wolf

Ida Pruitt was born in China in 1888, the daughter of American missionaries, and spent the first twelve years of her life in a village in the province of Shantung. In these formative years, she developed an understanding of things Chinese that matured into a rare appreciation of her adopted culture. She came to America for an education, gained experience here as a medical social worker, and then returned to China. From 1918 until 1938 she was head of the Social Service Department of Peking Union Medical College Hospital, a job that allowed her to blend her two heritages in service to her adopted country.

In Peking she lived in a way that revealed the depth of her dual heritage. Her home was Chinese, and she says of it in this book, "One's house is very important. It is the third and outermost of the shells that encase us. We do not choose our bodies, but we care for them and adorn them. We choose our clothes and our houses with regard for their fitness. My house, though many times smaller than [Madam Yin's], was as traditional in its layout, as well-built, and as harmonious in all its levels of roofs, its proportions in the houses and courtyards, and its details." The friends Ida Pruitt invited within her outermost shell were both Western and Chinese, and her ease in both cultures was a service to both. One wonders how many Westerners in those twenty years were aided by Pruitt in their first steps toward understanding the unique beauty of Peking and its inhabitants.

Fortunately for us, Pruitt has extended these good offices far beyond the few dozen Westerners she met and befriended in China. Through *A Daughter of Han*, first published in 1945, generations of students have come to appreciate the quality of life among working-class Chinese without becoming mired in

sentimentality; they have also been introduced to the despair of poverty in prerevolutionary China without the politically motivated exaggerations that raise doubts about those realities. In her new book, *Old Madam Yin*, Pruitt tells us of a way of life that will never be found again in China, that of the very wealthy. She preserves for us the style and grace of their world without either romanticizing them or castigating them for a lack of social enlightenment as yet beyond their comprehension. She also gives us rare glimpses into Peking's foreign community—another class of people and way of life no longer seen in China—during those last years before the Japanese occupation. But for the China scholar, the value of *Old Madam Yin* derives from Pruitt's keen eye and expert control of ethnographic detail.

The Chinese family system was organized around the kinship of men. The ancestral rites performed in the lineage hall focused the patrilineal principle and celebrated the antiquity of the male line. Be he mythical or real, the founding ancestor was always male. Women were the property of their fathers' and then their husbands' lineages, but they became members of their husband's lineage only after death. Men were born members of a lineage. The birth of a daughter who could not provide sons for her father's lineage was treated as a disappointment at best; the birth of a son—even one with a multitude of elder brothers—was cause for feasting and celebration. This cultural imbalance is reflected in much of the scholarly literature on China in that the lives and activities of women are barely touched on. Ida Pruitt's books are a rare exception. Without lecturing, she shows us how *women* viewed Chinese society.

When a feminine perspective is taken on a male-oriented society, the conflict between gender stereotype and reality becomes starkly apparent. Chinese women were weak of body and character, incompetent in the world of affairs, and dependent by nature. Anyone who remembers Ida Pruitt's *Daughter of Han* and her women friends will find the stereotype ludicrous. Before Ning Lao Tai-tai learned the ways of the world

outside her walls, she might have preferred to live quietly at home raising her children; but once necessity forced her out into that world to make a living, she did so with zest and skill. She learned quickly what people to see and how to motivate them to act in her behalf. Too often women's political skills are unobserved or discounted because they operate in arenas that are not public. Ning Lao Tai-tai, however, did as well as any man in her social class when it came to accomplishing things in the "world of affairs." If this woman was by nature dependent, she concealed it remarkably well.

Among wealthy women it is harder to see beyond the stereotype, but once again Pruitt has allowed us to wander behind the spirit screen. Although Chinese decorum insists that women must obey their fathers and brothers when young, their husbands when married, and their sons when widowed, Old Madam Yin, a very decorous lady, was a thoroughly independent personality. She loved her children, but she had learned, as every woman must, that the system worked for men and that men may or may not bestow their assets equitably. In an attempt to control some of the uncertainties life held for women, she built a row of apartments to provide for the education of a granddaughter. Knowing the predilection her son had for his second wife over his first, she adopted a son for the latter and built another row of apartments to finance his education. This was neither dependent nor incompetent behavior. Strong character in Chinese women is recognized and admired only when they are old and is attributed to the fact of their age. But if they were dependents and incompetents before their hair turned white and their husbands died, how did they suddenly acquire the skills and attributes necessary to dominate a household? A careful reading of Pruitt's books will answer that question and pose another: How did we not recognize half of the population of China for all these years?

In the last decade some anthropologists have suggested that men and women operate with different models of the social and symbolic world. Pruitt's studies of Chinese women suggest a less sweeping interpretation, namely that women

simply reject some of men's social constructions (such as the sanctity of the male line in China) and adapt others to fit their own understanding of women's capabilities. Madam Yin gave an example when she showed Ida Pruitt and three friends a painting of Mu Lan, a young woman who went to war in place of her elderly father and returned home with military honors. " 'A good filial daughter,' Lao Tai-tai said piously, but the gleam in her eye told us that women could do anything they put their minds to whatever their country or race, and that the implied compliment to the four foreign women from the hospital had not been the only inspiration of her remarks."

An apt example of the adaptation of male models to female needs comes from *A Daughter of Han*, and it uses the very imagery of the male ancestral myth to illustrate the strength and power of women. Speaking in a somber mood brought on by her educated 35-year-old granddaughter's failure to marry, Lao Tai-tai says, "Life must go on. The generations stretch back thousands of years to the great ancestor parents. They stretch for thousands of years into the future, generation upon generation. Seen in proportion to this great array, the individual is but a small thing. But on the other hand no individual can drop out. Each is a link in the great chain. No one can drop out without breaking the chain. A woman stands with one hand grasping the generations that have gone before and with the other the generations to come. It is her common destiny with all women." Many times have I heard men expressing this sentiment in Taiwan, but never once have I heard one suggest that the crucial links were female. It was not a topic women dwelt on, but when this old woman who had been cut adrift from the men's family system wished to place herself and her children in the larger context of society, she turned not to her husband's family (although they all bore his surname), but took the model of all men's families and identified the links in the construct as female.

Ida Pruitt is not interested in anthropological theories. Her purpose here is to share with us her intimate knowledge of the lives of Chinese women, teaching us to appreciate as she has

their subtleties and strengths. For me the ultimate test of Madam Yin's character was in her chance meeting at Pruitt's house with Ning Lao Tai-tai, the working woman of *A Daughter of Han*. Seating arrangements in China, even at a foreigner's tea table, are matters of rank. On this occasion Madam Yin neither assumed her own right to the higher place nor deferred hypocritically to her social inferior. Instead the two women dueled with great humor and energy over the honor of taking second place—both of them far too intelligent to pretend to ignore their difference in rank, both far too genuine to think it really mattered. In this her ninety-first year, Ida Pruitt has added another personality to our cast of notable Chinese women and another dimension to our understanding of Chinese society. We are all in her debt.

Old Madam Yin

CHAPTER 1

It was because Lao Tai-tai (the Honorable-Exalted) wanted a grandson that she had come to see me that first time, and it was because we became friends that we continued to see each other.

It was necessary that the Wife of the Second Master, Lao Tai-tai's Second Son, should have a son. The concubine was young and beautiful and pregnant. It was not fitting that the eldest son of that branch of the family, in the House of the Second Master, should be the son of a concubine; and the Wife should have her own son to cherish her in her old age and to worship her and take care of her needs after she should have joined the ancestors.

These things were told me by Li Kuan, the social worker who made the routine visits to the families who wanted to adopt children from us. Babies born in our hospital were healthy and well nourished, and our fame had gone abroad. We were able to find good homes for those who were not wanted.

"The Wife is about thirty-five and has a daughter of twelve. She has never had any other children. There is no hope for a son from her. She is sick most of the time. And—" Li Kuan lowered her voice in respect, "her father was a famous scholar. His family did not have much money but everyone knows about it. It is one of great renown."

This I realized was an added reason there had to be a son for the Wife. The Yin Family would have had much public opinion against them if they used ill the daughter of a famous scholar; and if they went further than necessary in being good to her, they would build up much prestige.

Li Kuan read my mind. "It's not from fear of public opinion that they think of adopting a child but because it is the right

thing to do. Lao Tai-tai has a kind heart and she knows what is fitting. She is the head of the Family—has been since the Old Master died. I guess she was that before also—and she wants everyone in the Family to have what is right for them to have. There is the Family responsibility to the daughter-in-law."

I saw that in Li Kuan's mind the decision had been made. She felt we should give a child to this family. "But," I protested, "they are rich. That means the child will be cared for by maids. He will be the pampered pet of a lot of women and be utterly spoiled. You know our policy. We do not give babies to wealthy families—where the mothers themselves do not care for their children."

"But this family is different—" Li Kuan refused my generalization.

I smiled. I knew her enthusiasms.

"It really is different. They have not always been wealthy, and the women of the family are like the women we know in the families of our friends. They live very simply. And—" Li Kuan hurried to get away from the subject I had raised, "you should see the house. It is as beautiful as the Imperial Palace in the Forbidden City. And you should see—"

"From what is their income? Who works at what?" I brought her back to the subject.

"They have a family estate in Anhwei Province, from where the Old Man came. The First Master, the Eldest Son, cares for that."

"So they are absentee landlords living in the city off the rents of the land."

"Oh no," Li Kuan hastened to say, "the estate is not large. It supports only the First Master and his branch of the Family. It is the Second Master who counts. He is the one who has made the money. He ran a uniform factory in Mukden for Chang Tso-lin, the Old Marshal, and he came to Peking with the Young Marshal. He now runs a uniform factory here and he has other businesses besides." Li Kuan was trying to hurry past this topic. She knew that I did not like the uniform facto-

ries and the pittance they paid the women who worked in them from daybreak to sunset. We often saw the women pouring out of the big gates at dusk, eyes glazed with weariness, looking straight ahead and seeing nothing but the home toward which they doggedly walked; and knew that they clutched in their hands what should have been barely enough to feed themselves but without which they would have had nothing to feed anyone. Why did the industrial revolution, taking women's work out of their homes, give them always so little and ask for so much, when it first came into any older pattern of life?

"He has a wonderful collection of paintings and ceramics." Li Kuan knew my love for the beauty of China, its physical beauty and that made by its men and women of genius and that made by its ordinary people also. "The Second Master is the Head of the Family here in Peking. He is the one in the family who makes money. The Third Master is teaching in Tientsin but he comes home often. He has one of the courtyards in the compound. The Fourth Master is at school in Paris—"

"Then the family is one of real wealth." Only a family of wealth could have sent a son to school in Europe or America, unless on a scholarship. I was sure Li Kuan would have mentioned the scholarship had there been one.

Li Kuan's eyes looked faintly distressed. "They are wealthy now but they have not always been so. They are simple people like us." Then, as though that clinched the matter, "The Second and Third Masters went to school in Japan and the First Master has never been anywhere outside the country." It took less money to send sons to school in Japan than to Europe or America. The financial condition of the family could be charted by the schooling of the different sons. She went on quickly to allow me no time to think of more questions. "There is also a daughter still at home."

Then Li Kuan drew a deep breath. "May they come to see the babies tomorrow?"

My office was invaded next day. A silken flood poured into

the room. Like an army with banners flying the family invaded the room, with Lao Tai-tai, the general, in the van. I began to understand many things.

She did not hesitate in the doorway as most callers did—for effect, out of formal courtesy, or waiting for directions—but started immediately across the room toward me. There was no jar of the harmonies in the room, no breaking into the pattern, but the rhythm of the room swung wider and the accents shifted.

She walked swiftly on her tiny bound feet—no more than six inches long—bound beautifully according to the fashion of footbinding of the North. She came across the room with a speed and grace that made those of us with natural feet look as though we moved in sections.

She was a little over five feet tall and was slender as a mature woman is slender. Her coat, cut straight as all coats were cut for both men and women, did not hang flat but showed shadows. Her coat and trousers were of grey silk—the grey of which the Chinese are so fond, the grey with life in it. A pattern of tiny twigs woven into the cloth caught the light and heightened the sense of its life. Her clothes were cut in the modified “old fashion” that had great style and distinction. The coat was wide and came to her knees. The long sleeves were straight and wide. The trousers were bound in at the ankle above the little triangle of starched white cotton stockings and the tiny black cloth shoes. The narrow straight standing collar buttoned around a firm neck. Her grey hair was combed back into the conventional chignon on the nape of her neck—“modern” yet Chinese, uninfluenced by Western ways. Her face had been “enlarged”—the hair plucked from the forehead on her wedding day to straighten the hairline and make the high square forehead that was the sign of a married woman. Her face was smooth and could have been the face of a young woman but for the wear of experience that showed, not in any wrinkles, but in the lifting of the planes and the heightening of the cheekbones. It was an oval face, wider at the top, but enough off the classic symmetry to make it arresting—the cheekbones were too high and one

was very slightly larger than the other. The eyes were long, with the deep fold and the double lids that were so highly prized. They must have been very beautiful when she was young and were still very fine. It was the expression in the eyes, however, that was most arresting. There was joy in life, zest in life and in all things of life. There was a vibrancy in her whole person that seemed to go from her toes to every hair lying so smoothly on her head. She was a complete person, in harmony with herself and her world.

She sat on the chair I offered her, the one by my desk, and sat bolt upright. She did not touch the back of her chair, and yet there was no hint of strain or effort. She was as relaxed and graceful as though lounging—which I was sure she never did—in her own garden.

Li Kuan made the introductions. The bevy had sorted themselves out according to precedence and were seated around the room.

"This is the Second Mistress." That would be the Wife of the Second Master, the one who would be the mother of the child about to be adopted. Her well-bred face, though not pretty, was well enough formed, but had the flattened-out look so often seen in the faces of women who are not loved, those who do not fight the frustrations of their lives. With spirit her face might have been distinguished, though it could never have been beautiful. She wore the long gown-dress of the current style—a modification of the Manchu robe. The dull dark material was rich enough but seemed muted to meet her muted existence. She seemed older than her mother-in-law, even though one could see easily that she was a woman in her thirties.

"This is the Second Young Mistress." The term Li Kuan used was that for one born in the house and not for one married into it. This then was Lao Tai-tai's own daughter. Somewhere there was another and older one. The daughter would have been addressed by the same title whenever she was in her mother's home even if she had been married, but the long heavy braid of black hair down the girl's back had already told me that she

was not, and her likeness to Lao Tai-tai had already told me whose daughter she was. She was vivid but still not as vivid as her mother. I felt I was seeing something of what the old lady must have been in her youth. The girl's long black silk gown—she was still in modified mourning for her father—was cut with as much style as her sister-in-law's lacked and was worn with the grace the other woman had never had.

"This is the daughter in the Second Mistress's House." The girl of twelve was shy but was also interested in watching what was happening. Something, apparently, of the Yin spirit had descended to her.

"And this is the Third Mistress." I looked at the tall, gaunt woman whose like I knew so well—no ideas, no charm, just a woman of the leisure class, the wife of the Third Son, the Third Master.

The serving woman, standing unobtrusively but not at all withdrawn, was not introduced.

Lao Tai-tai leaned forward. "About that baby for me—that I may take my grandson home—"

Inwardly I gasped. This was most unusual directness. She did not talk of the weather or the meals we had eaten, or ask about my health or family tree. She did not need this period of sparring to work out her plans, nor did she need it to sense the situation. All was settled in Lao Tai-tai's mind, and I could see why all was settled in Li Kuan's mind also. I was to learn that she was always direct and also that she had already taken my measure as I had taken hers.

So the silken wave flowed down the hospital corridors and into the small ward where, temporarily, we had four of the babies for whom we were finding homes, and engulfed the four cots. There was for a while the sound only of soft cloth-soled shoes sliding and patting around the beds, and through the hospital odors of milk and drugs and soap floated a faint fragrance of sandalwood and musk.

None of the others said anything while looking over the babies as women look over goods in a shop, but they watched the old woman out of the corners of their eyes. Methodically she

went from bed to bed, asking me at each to tell her the background of the baby that lay in it. We did not give names or details of the families they had come from but told of the kind of stock from which each child had come. Whether the child had come of farmer stock, or student stock, or from the poor of the city was considered to be of great importance. Some liked best the "clean country heritage." Others were pleased to have a child whose parents were intelligent, were students in the universities of our great city. The Old Lady stayed longest by the bed of a well-developed child of eight months. He had a "long-square" face, a well-shaped head, and well-marked features already showing the good bone structure beneath. Fortune tellers—those who tell the future from studying the features of the face and the shape of the head—always prophesy success and official rank to those who look the way this child did. He also gave promise of classic beauty.

"And this one?" Lao Tai-tai asked as she stood by his bed.

"His mother was a serving woman, and his father was the master."

"Ah—a secret child. Look at this forehead, the shape of his head. He is a well-put-together human being. Secret children are strong and intelligent."

I knew of this belief. "His mother is a very intelligent woman," I said. "I have never met his father."

"He has a bad temper," said the nurse, standing by the bed, dressed in her starched white uniform with the little starched white cap on her head. "He knows what he wants and yells for it."

The others had now gathered around the Old Lady.

"This is the one we want." Lao Tai-tai's voice was completely assured. It was evident the decision was hers to make and not for the one who would be the child's mother. "We'll take his eight characters and let you know as soon as we have had them read." But I felt sure from watching her that the geomancer, the Master of Wind and Water, who read the "eight characters" (two for the hour of the child's birth, two for the day, two for the month, and two for the year, and all out of the mystic cycle