

Document 10.14: Excerpts describing her working life, from *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* by Ida Pruitt, 1945

Ida Pruitt was born in 1888 to American missionaries and lived in China for fifty years. She worked with the Chinese poor at the Peking¹ Union Medical College and became an organizer of the Chinese industrial cooperatives in both Guomindang and communist regions.

Ning Lao, born in 1867, shared her life's story with Ida Pruitt in conversations over a two-year period. She described the mundane activities of a poor Chinese woman with bound feet forced to work outside the home to support her family. Ida Pruitt left China in 1938 following the Japanese invasion, and lost contact with Ning Lao.

Part 1, in which Ning Lao describes working as a maidservant, 1911–1921

I worked five years for Mrs. Yardley. She had a good disposition in a way. She got a position for my son in the Customs House where her husband worked, and for that I will always be grateful. Probably she thought that she had done enough for me to get work for my son with her husband. When she raised the wages of the other servants and did not raise mine I was not happy. While I was with her I had good wages and the work was not too hard.

But the way I came to leave her was this...I was out back of the house when Mrs. Yardley came rushing out and told me that I had done something wrong. I was able to tell her that I had not, but her anger was not appeased. So she went into the house and told the cook that it was time for tea and scolded him because there was no boiling water. She took the poker and began to poke the fire. He said to her, "You must not poke the fire. I am baking. The cakes are in the oven and they will fall if you poke the fire." He used the informal you.

"You must not say 'you' to me."

"What shall I say to you?"

¹ Former name for Beijing

“You must not use ‘you,’ you must say ‘Mrs. Yardley.’”

“I am an uneducated country man. I always say ‘you.’” With that she slapped his face. He caught her wrists and held her.

I came on them so and said, “Whatever in the world are you up to? Why have you a hold of the mistress?”

“If I let her go she will hit me.” I pulled Mrs. Yardley, and the wash coolie pulled the cook, and we managed to pull them apart.

The cook packed his things and left. He left in the middle of preparing the meal. What else could he do? He had not planned to leave. He did not want to leave, but she had left him no other path to follow. He was a good cook. Never have I seen one so good. He was clean. His kitchen was washed and scrubbed every day. And the percentage that he took from buying was very low. He rolled up his bedding and went away.

Then came a cook who knew how to get on with Mrs. Yardley. He smiled and said “yes” to whatever she said and went his own way.

She was a good mistress in many ways but she did not know how to talk to us. When she spoke of us she used the word for bond servants. I would say to her, “We are not bond servants, such as used to be in China and were bought with money. We are hired people. We are free to come and go.” But she always spoke of us as her bond servants.

And she was always better to the new than to the old. In the Chinese teachings we say that the longer people have to do with each other the thicker becomes that which binds them together for good or ill. In a Chinese family a servant who has been with them for years is like a member of the family and his words have weight in the family and he can at times speak for the family. It was always the new with her...

A new amah² was hired to sew the clothing for the children and was invited to have tea with Mrs. Yardley rather than Ning Lao. One day Ning Lao was sent away with the children.

When I came back I saw that Mrs. Yardley had laid aside a piece of cake for me, but I would not eat it.

“Why do you not eat your tea?” she said.

“I am a Chinese. I have never liked your tea but as your servant I could not say no to you. I took it. We have a saying, ‘When those above give, those below cannot refuse.’” Her face became very red.

Ning Lao left the service of Mrs. Yardley.

As I had left Mrs. Yardley and had no place to work, my friend Mrs. Lan began to look around for me. She was teaching Chinese to a missionary, Mrs. Reed. She spoke to Mrs. Reed about me, and Mrs. Reed asked Mrs. Yardley, who said that I was a good amah but that my temper was not good.

Always it was my temper that has lost jobs for me. It has always been because of my temper that I did not stay long in one position. Always they would say that they liked me but that my mouth was not governed. I was born when my parents were older. I was their baby and they spoiled me. It was hard for me to take anything that was said against me...

If they liked me and told me that I was a good worker and a good person I was happy. I was satisfied. I did not think of money if I and mine had enough to eat. Always I was telling my children to be patient, but I was never patient myself and I would let no one get ahead of me.

Ning Lao's new employer, Miss Mason, was another Englishwoman running a missionary school.

² Nanny

Miss Mason had a peculiar disposition. When I first went to her nothing was too good for me. It was, "Oh amah, you are a good amah." She would take me by the hand and pat me. But if anything went wrong, she would change very quickly.

She always spoke of us as bond servants. She would pray to her god to forgive her sins and she called herself God's bond servant. And as God forgave his bond servant, so she hoped she could forgive her bond servants....

But the worst trouble I had with her was the trouble of the eyeglasses. I asked for time off to go down town to have mine mended. She said that that was not necessary. The cook could take them to town the next time he went, and I could wear hers. She took them out of her pocket and gave them to me. They were a very fine pair of bifocals. It was a pleasure to wear them.

The next day I was not feeling well. I had a headache, and so I went to a neighbor's to have my temples cupped for my headache. While there, lying on the bed, I felt the glasses in my pocket, so I took them out, fearing that I would lie on them and break them. The cupping took a long time and we talked about many matters. I forgot the glasses.

After I left, the little boy of the house, a boy of about nine, saw them and said to his mother, "Mother, let me take these to auntie." The children of the family called me auntie. As he was running along the street after me, calling me and holding the glasses up in his hand, he met a man who stopped him and said, "Let me see them. What is it?" He took them in his hands, put them in his pocket, and ran away. As he had long legs he was soon out of sight. I heard the wails of the child calling me and turned.

"He took the glasses, he took the glasses." Then I was frightened. What should I do? The man was gone. He could not be caught. It was Sunday afternoon. I knew that Miss Mason had gone to church. I went to her house and waited at the gate for her return. When she saw me she said, "Oh, amah. It is Sunday. What are you doing here?" And she was all smiles and pleasant. But

when I told her, her face changed. “They were a very valuable pair of glasses. You are a naughty amah. You do not need to come anymore.”

So I went home and was very miserable indeed. She did not believe that the glasses had been stolen. She thought that I had sold them or kept them for myself. I felt pressed down till I could not breathe. I had offered to pay for them, but where could I find the money?...

It happened one day that my neighbor’s little boy saw some men carrying a procession of bridal presents, and in one of the carriers he recognized the young man who had stolen the glasses. He raised a great cry and the police took the young man in custody. And the young man confessed. I was so delighted that I went immediately to tell Miss Mason... “It is all right. The boy has been caught.”

And she said, “Have the glasses been found?” and I said that they had not but that the boy had been caught.

“Oh,” said she, “is that poor boy in that very dirty prison? He must be let out at once.” And she sent her cook to tell them to let him out immediately. The boy came of a good family. He was the son of one who had been governor of Weihaiwei. So for his father’s sake the matter was hushed up. They had become very poor and had no money to pay for the glasses or for anything else. The glasses were lost. The boy said he had put them in a crack in the wall. Who knows?

I worked for Miss Mason. When she was happy all was well. When she was not happy she would speak of the glasses.

Source: Pruitt, Ida. *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945. Chapter 17.