

Document 10.8: Excerpts describing view of family 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.

Ning Lao described her views on her family, 1911–1921. Here she discusses her relationship with her daughter:

My daughter was a good girl until she was twenty-eight. When she said a word it was a true word, and she did what I told her to do. I was out all day, but while her father lived she was good and safe...But after he died and her husband went away and never returned she learned bad ways from the neighbors in the court.²

It is important for the poor to have good neighbors; they live so closely. I had to be out all day and wanted someone to be in the court with my daughter and the children. I went out in the morning to buy my wares and came home to breakfast. Then I went out to sell and did not get home until night.

My daughter had always been a good girl and listened to my words. But now she reproached me for her life. She said that I had spoiled it. The new neighbors in our court became very friendly with my daughter. The woman painted her face. She cut her hair above her temples. It hung over her face in long, parted bangs. She talked all day with my daughter about pleasure. She talked and laughed pleasantly but she was not good. The things she talked about to my daughter were not good.

One day when I came home I found that my daughter had cut her front hair in the same long uneven bangs. I was very angry. I seized the bangs and said that I would tear them out, that only a lewd woman wore such. Good women combed their hair straight back and sensibly. My daughter answered me back

¹ Former name for Beijing

² A reference to the traditional style of housing with a courtyard in the center, known as *sibeyuan*.

and said that she was a married woman now and that she no longer needed to obey me. It was the first time she had ever answered me.

My daughter had learned to read a little and write a little, so she kept the accounts for me. Now she would not put down all the items. She began to buy things with my money and to say that I would not let her be happy. Truly it is important to have good neighbors only. I was so unhappy I prayed to Heaven and to Earth that my sin should be on me and not on my children....

After a time I began to hear tales. My friends told me that I should watch my daughter. People looked at me and from their looks I knew there was something wrong and that it probably had to do with a man. One Sunday when I went home, as I went into the room, the man got up from the *kang*³. He was lying sprawled on the bed and the children were all in the room. Su Teh⁴ was home for the day from the boarding school. The other granddaughter was too young to know about such things. There was also my son.

I said, "You must not let that man sleep on my bed." I could not say more because the children were before me. But when Su Teh had returned to school and the smaller one had gone out to play I scolded my daughter. The man saw the look of wrath on my face and went. I laid my hands on her to beat her. She seized my wrists and resisted me. My anger was very great. I returned to work.

Then came my friend Mrs. Lan and begged me to cast my anger aside. She said many words. "A bucket of water thrown out on the ground, a daughter married out of the house, are both gone." She urged me to forget my daughter and to let her go her own way. I listened to her words and took my son to live with me....

Ning Lao continues to have problems with her daughter's way of life.

I thought my daughter was foolish to let any man in her room and so give people a chance to talk, but I did not know how things were. I told my daughter that she was foolish and did not use her head. Why should she listen to good words that were not matched by deeds? Of what use were good words when all the rules of what is right were on the other side? The man had great boys of fifteen and sixteen running the streets, and a wife and children at home. Even if she had not the joy of spring in her life, why did she

³ A traditional Chinese bed

⁴ Ning Lao's granddaughter

not use her head? She had daughters only. She could marry again. What good were his words alone to her?

When I came home to live she would not cook for me. She would not talk to me. I did not know what was the matter.

One day when I was out she moved away. When I came home she had gone and taken the younger granddaughter with her. The older granddaughter was at boarding school. I was enraged. I went to their house. I took the bowls and the plates. I threw them on the ground and they broke. I told her that never had a woman of our family so disgraced herself. I said that I would match lives with her. "I will fight you until one of us dies."

I would have laid hands on her but the neighbors came in and separated us. They sent for my friend Mrs. Lan, who came and took me away. In my rage I rolled on the ground and cursed. I said that I would go to court and accuse my daughter. But Mrs. Lan quieted me. She told me that my daughter was a married woman and so not under the control of her mother, and that the world would not hold me responsible for what she did. That even though her husband was lost and her mother-in-law in Manchuria, and although I had brought her up and supported her and cared for her all these years, the magistrate would not listen to me. It was not my family, the family of Ning, that was injured. It was the family of Li. There were none here of that name to accuse her. So I thought no more of going to the magistrate....

Then one day Mrs. Lan told me that the matter, as far as he was concerned, had been settled to the custom of taking concubines.... Mrs. Lan's son-in-law told her that one day the man came to see his mother. He told her that he and my daughter had arranged to be man and wife, that my daughter had said that she would follow him as wife or as concubine, which she did not care, and that she would stay with him whether he had money or none, and anyway she could always earn for herself....

For two years I did not see my daughter.... She had a child, another girl. Surely she was destined to ill fortune. When the child was four she died of scarlet fever and I was glad she died. To what family did she belong? Where would she fit in the pattern of life? Surely it was better that she died....

Ning Lao contemplates a remarriage.

One day when I was working for Mrs. Milikin in the lace factory she sent for me and said, "Are you not a widow?" And I said that I was.

"Have you no thought to take another person?"

"I have enough to do," I said, "to support myself. Why should I add another person?"

Then she told me that Pastor Pan's wife had died and that he had many small children and wanted to marry a capable woman who would take care of them for him. I said that I could not destroy two families, mine and my daughter's, to take care of his family. She said that he was a man who could support me well, that he had land and houses and a good position. I said that if I had had any thought of such a thing I would not have left Penglai. Mrs. Milikin's face became red.

On the way home the more I thought of it the more I wanted to do it. To marry him meant comfort and ease for me and the end of my struggles. But I could not. I would not desert my daughter and her two little children. We did not know then whether her husband was alive or dead. And I could not desert or spoil the home for my little son. I was not a prostitute that I should only think of my own comfort and ease. I must think of the future of my children and of my children's children.

Ning Lao finds out the fate of another daughter:

It was while I was working for Mrs. Yardley that I heard again of my daughter who had been sold. A young man came often from Weihaiwei to buy goods from the shop where a friend of my son's worked. The friend of my son said to him, "Are you not the husband of so-and-so and is not Mrs. Ning the mother of your wife's body?"

The friend came to see me and told me about it. So I went to see the young man in the shop. I was dressed in my rough clothes as I always am. He brought me baskets of fruit from Weihaiwei as presents. He was a very presentable young man and he told me about my daughter. The family who had bought her from my husband had done well by her. They had taught her fine embroidery. They had married her, when not too old—it must have been when she was about fifteen or sixteen—for she had a daughter about the same age as my eldest daughter's first child. She had been married into a family of merchants in

the city of Yung Cheng, not far from Weihaiwei. The young man, her husband, had studied for the examinations but had not passed, so he had opened a shop in his native town and sold such things as people in a small city need. It was a family that lived well.

Her husband came to see me whenever he came to Qufu on shopping trips. He always said that I must go to see my daughter. But I could not go on so long a journey.

One summer Mrs. Yardley went to Weihaiwei for her summer vacation. She took me with her. I wrote to my daughter telling her I was in Weihaiwei. A letter came back saying that they were very busy. There was no word that I should go or that I should not go, but how could I go after such a letter? I was but a serving woman and I wore the clothes of a serving woman. I had no money to buy smart clothes.

The next summer my daughter got cholera and died. Her “aunt,” the official’s wife who had bought her, sent me a message by the young man that she too was dying. She said that my daughter had been well cared for and that I was not to mourn. The young man, my daughter’s husband, has never ceased to be remorseful that he did not bring my daughter and me together. So I never saw her again.

Years later (1935-1937), Ning Lao describes her successful elder granddaughter who had studied in the United States.

My granddaughter, Su Teh, came back from America and was even better to us than before. She had a good position in the college and lived in the hall where the women teachers lived. She made much money and was very generous. Every Sunday she came to see us and brought things for the children and helped with the tuition for the children of my son....

But she has not married. I tell my granddaughter she should marry. She says that marriage is not necessary to working for the country. That is new talk. We all know that family is more important than anything else. Every woman must have a husband and children. How can there be a country if there are no families and children?

My granddaughter is thirty-five and she has not married. I went to her teacher, her old friend. I said, “Can you not do something about it? Do you not know one of those with whom she works, an educated man with whom she can talk? Could you not arrange a match for my granddaughter before it is too late? She should have her family. She should have her people around her.”

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.

Source: Pruitt, Ida. *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945. Chapters 17, 20.