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• Sales Rank: #3748876 in Books

Published on: 1962Number of items: 1Binding: Hardcover

• 189 pages

Most helpful customer reviews

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful. A rare look at life at the turn of the century in China

By Amazon Customer

China always seems to have a veil of mystery around it. This book give a rare glimpse of life at the turn of the 19th century as the empire was dying and the nationalists and communists were gearing up for battle. I read this book for a class on Chinese women and absolutely loved it. I will always remember the part of having her feet bound and how her mother would lay on her legs at night so that she could sleep. Unfortunately I lost the book after many years. It wasn't until now, as I was conducting inventory of our biography collection at the library where I work, that I came across the sequal to this book. For those who could not get enough of Lao Tai-tai, there is a second book by Ida Pruitt titled "Old Madam Yin: a memoir of Peking life 1926-1938." The copyright date is 1979. The Daughter of Han is now a wealthy widow struggling to adapt to the new order. If you can't find it on amazon you can always Inter-library loan the book, I know there's at least one library in the midwest that has it;).

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

A wonderful, insightful narrative of China's tumultuous history, from an old Chinese woman: social history at its finest!

By Nick Dupree

History is, ultimately, the story of people and their relations, whether peaceful, characterized by the worst

violence and gore, or the myriad of grays in between. The "Great Man" historians offer a lot of the peoples' story, through the words of the great leaders and their actions and reactions to the people and society they helped lead, and for that reason I'd never discount "Great Man" histories and still read them. But I've learned the best way to figure out the story of a people is from the horse's mouth, reading the narratives of the people of that time and place and learning from that common, everyday person the rhythms of that past culture, how the society functioned, etc. etc. This story of a Chinese working woman as told by the woman herself is an excellent example of such a narrative, a great and sweeping social history of China's working majority. This is social history at its finest--or perhaps, since it was first published in the '30s, a proto-social history that served as a crucial model for every social historian that followed.

"Daughter of Han" is an intimate portrait, not only of a woman's long, rich life and experiences, but also a rare glimpse of a late Imperial China in the throes of dynastic decline, foreign aggression, and, eventually, revolutionary social and political change.

Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai (roughly equivalent to "old lady Ning" or "granny Ning" in English) began, and spent the bulk of her life, in Pénglái, a port city in Shandong province, and a culture wedded to tradition. Nowhere was tradition more strictly upheld than in Shandong, which, being the birthplace of Confucius and the home of the Temple of Confucius in Qufu, was the epicenter of traditional Confucianism. Ning, though admittedly devoted to tradition herself, nonetheless refers to Pénglái as a "conservative and provincial" place deeply concerned with "saving face" (p. 120) where rules for women are strict (people worry women may have been menstruating or "with her husband" and are "unclean.")

Ning explains that women, especially young women newly eligible for marriage, are better never seen or heard, sequestered indoors or in an inner court. When parents came asking after a girl to be a future daughter-in-law and asked "what is that girl like?" and neighbors said they didn't know who that girl is, that meant she was a good girl. "We've never seen her before" was a big compliment (p. 29). Bound feet, a tradition that all strata of Chinese society held dear and was at peak popularity during Ning's lifetime, were essential for a good match: "match-makers don't ask 'is she beautiful?' they ask 'are her feet small?'" (p. 22) Ning had bound feet, and for women in late Imperial Pénglái unbound feet "are a sign of laziness." The Muslims, or "Mohammadeans," of China were one of the only groups that opposed foot binding, believing that people should leave the world as unaltered as they entered it. (p. 101)

Though a deeply traditional society, Americans may be surprised at how enlightened some Chinese practices were during this period. Facing no official discrimination, Chinese Muslims had great social mobility. They served at every level, as Mandarins, officials, bureaucrats, generals, soldiers, and had no barriers to rising in rank. Though Ning herself condemned prostitution, it was tolerated, and gay behavior was also tolerated, not punished by death as in European and Middle Eastern societies of the 19th century. The opium addicted Assistant Prefect had a son who "swayed like a woman and didn't care for his wife, spending all his time with actors and female impersonators." (pp. 111-112) To devote time not to work but to leisurely pursuits, odd ones or not, was equally privileged and strange from Ning's perspective. Work is what brings merit.

Merit determines not only success, but personhood. Ning relays the story of her son-in-law and his family: despite descending from successful military men, not one of the four sons "became a person" (p. 170). Her son-in-law rarely held down a job, and even tried to sell Ning's daughter for money to feed his opium habit before she thwarted him. But Ning also tells of "a woman who had four sons and begged. She raised them and all four became Mandarins." (p. 225) An auspicious fate and work can overcome a lot.

Reading Ning's experiences, one is acutely aware how deeply opium and opium addiction had wormed its way into the fabric of Chinese society and how much damage it had done. Ning admits that "everyone" in

China has used opium to some degree (p. 83). And her husband, her "opium sot," makes moot the Confucian obligation to be subordinate, as he is normally too drug-addled to work, and it's her that always must work to support the children and maintain the family's "face." Ning says that those who eat opium "have no face," and that is readily apparent when her husband sells their daughter (p. 66) for 3500 dollars to spend on opium (p. 67). Ning laments that women had no rights back then, the husband could do whatever he wanted with the children, including sell them to the neighborhood brothel, and the mother was legally helpless (Ning implies she *does* support some of the Republic-era progress in women's rights). After she gets her daughter back by arguing the sale was invalid, Ning's husband promises not to sell her again, only to sell her again soon after. (p. 71) Ning's daughter ended up sold to the wife of a magistrate for an unknown sum, and seeing the child well-provided for in an affluent household, she leaves her there, knowing that her husband and his opium addiction will make it hard to feed the child. Pruitt admirably refrains from inserting her own views into Ning's life story, but even without any editorializing, it is easy to understand why the Qing government issued edicts forbidding opium and launched numerous campaigns to stop the drug's spread.

The Chinese people were incredibly resilient throughout the terrifying and violent upheavals of this period. Shandong province, containing the easternmost extent of the North China Plain and the Shandong peninsula that sticks out and divides the Bóh'i Sea from Yellow Sea, has been of critical importance throughout Chinese history and is the stage for many momentous events and much turmoil during Ning's life. Though the narrative is strangely silent on the Boxer Rebellion, which incubated in Shandong, Ning Lao T'ai-t'ai feels the effects of Japanese aggression acutely. You can nearly feel the panic in Ning's descriptions when the Japanese Navy first shows up at Pénglái, perhaps as part of the First Sino-Japanese War (p. 87) and she and everyone she knows frantically try to leave the city as Japanese gunboats' cannons roar and shells scream past the rooftops overhead (p. 88).

Even as Japanese conquest advances deep into China and societal stress reaches unprecedented levels as the Second Sino-Japanese War nears in the '30s and Ning's narrative draws to a close, Ning offers rare insights into Chinese resiliency during this time and the ideas behind it. Five stars.

39 of 41 people found the following review helpful.

Myra Scovel's Grandson Comments on Selling a Memoir in the Public Domain

By Mike Harris

I am the grandson of Myra Scovel, the author of this book.

I would like people contemplating a purchase of this book to know that this book is in the public domain, and thus available to them for free. It was copyrighted in 1962, and American books written between 1923 and 1963 had to have their copyright renewed 28 years after publication, or, as what happened with my grandmother's memoir, the text becomes part of the public domain.

The Internet Archive has made my grandmother's book available for free online. Amazon does not permit me to include a URL in a review, but using any of the popular search engines, you can search for "Internet Archive" (use quotes), and, once there, type this book's title into their search engine in order to find my grandmother's book on it. There, you can download copies in whatever format is convenient for you, at no cost to you whatsoever.

Or, you could of course pay Kessinger Publishing \$23 to have them send you a bound print copy. I'd ask you to bear in mind that my grandmother's descendents do not see one penny from Kessinger's sales, since no royalties are due on public domain texts. Nor was Kessinger Publishing my grandmother's original publisher.

Frankly, I would rather you have the opportunity to read my grandmother's memoir for free rather, than for

you to pay \$23 of profit to these people who have repurposed the public domain for their own profit. As a fan and proponent of the Creative Commons and the public domain, I find that business model rather offensive.

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