

A Pragmatist and His Free Spirit: The Half-Century Romance of Hu Shi & Edith Clifford Williams

by Susan Chan Egan and Chih-p'ing Chou



About the Book

This is an "East meets West" story, portraying the unconventional love of a Chinese civil rights activist and an American avant-garde artist. Hu Shi and Edith Clifford Williams met in 1914 when he was studying at Cornell University and she, a member of Alfred Stieglitz's inner circle of cognoscenti, was producing ground-breaking works in abstract art. She helped him reconcile his self-image as an independent thinker with his acquiescence to a prearranged marriage. Sustained by her unflinching honesty, Hu advocated John Dewey's pragmatism in solving China's myriad problems. After the Communists took over, he was vilified and his son was driven to suicide, but the pragmatic approach has since gained acceptance in his homeland. The poignant story of how the two persevered through cultural and political dislocations, and how they sorted out problems arising from Hu's relationships with various women, provides the readers with a single but varied and colorful strand to follow the history of modern China.

Discussion Guide

1. Were Hu Shi and Edith Clifford Williams products of their time? How were they exceptional for the societies in which they grew up? How would their lives be different had they been born half a century later?
2. In what ways did Edith Clifford Williams change Hu Shi's life, and vice versa? What compromises did they make? Were the compromises necessary and worthwhile?
3. Was Hu Shi right to marry Jiang Dongxiu under the circumstances? How would you characterize her life before and after the marriage? Did Hu behave responsibly toward her?

4. Do you feel Hu's behavior toward Williams was ethical? How about his behavior toward Tsao Cheng-ying? Roberta Lowitz? Virginia Davis Hartman? Which of the four do you sympathize with the most? Would you characterize any of them as feminist? Do you see a happy marriage possible between Hu and any of these women?
5. What impacts did Hu Shi's parents have over his character and personality? Did Edith Clifford Williams's family background broaden or limit her horizons? Do you find anything odd in the relationship between Hu and Williams's mother?
6. Judging from the photographs of her artwork in the book, do you think Edith Clifford Williams was a good artist? Was she right to withdraw from the New York art scene when she did?
7. How do you feel about Edith Clifford Williams's relationships with Charles Duncan and Alfred Stieglitz? What do you think were their attitudes toward her?
8. Do you feel Edith Clifford Williams was too timid or too assertive? Was she condescending toward Tsao Cheng-ying? Toward Jiang Dongxiu? Toward Virginia Davis Hartman? Did she do the right thing turning down a marriage proposal in her fifties?
9. *Life Magazine*, in its December 15, 1941 issue right after Pearl Harbor, published a ten-page spread on "Ambassador Hu Shih" with the following passage: "Last week Japanese planes, swooping unexpectedly out of the skies over Hawaii, brought to a sudden end a strange diplomatic war in which Hu Shi had played a crucial role . . ." Do you feel Hu Shi played a constructive role in U.S.-China relations? Was it in the interest of the United States to take side between China and Japan?
10. Was the Communist takeover of China inevitable? How has China's attitude toward the U.S. changed over the past sixty years? What were the factors leading to the changes?
11. What role does religion play in Edith Clifford Williams's life, if any? How about in Hu Shi's life?
12. Do you approve of the Confucian ethics with which Hu Shi grew up? What are the strengths and weaknesses of a Confucian society? Does it have any relevance in Asia today?
13. How did Hu Shi's attitude toward marriage change over time? What was his attitude toward prostitution?
14. Was Hu Shi a "patriot"? Was Edith Clifford Williams a "patriot"? Is patriotism a good thing?
15. If you were Edith Clifford Williams would you have felt your privacy violated to have your letters made public after your death?
16. Do you feel the book is well structured? Does it provide you with enough background material? Are any sections superfluous?
17. Which part of the story surprises you the most?

Author Bio

Susan Chan Egan is an independent scholar living in Santa Barbara, California. She is the author of **A Latterday Confucian** (Harvard University Press, 1987) and co-translator of **The Song of Everlasting Sorrow** (Columbia University Press 2008).

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