



# MUSLIMS, MISSIONARIES AND WARLORDS IN NORTHWESTERN CHINA

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Just over a 100 years ago, China witnessed the rise of the Yi-hetuan, popularly referred to as the Boxer Rebellion. The members of this movement rose in defiance against the Western presence in their country, a presence enforced by the treaty settlements that had followed the Opium Wars of the 19th century. Boxers especially resented the growing number of Western missionaries active in many Chinese provinces, and Boxer attacks on isolated mission stations increased as the 19th century drew to a close. In addition to some 250 Westerners, thousands of Chinese Christians also died at the hands of angry young Chinese men.

The movement was decisively crushed in August of 1900 by a military expedition of Western and Japanese forces. The Boxer Rebellion ended in disaster not only for the xenophobic Boxers—who mistakenly believed they would be impervious to Western bullets—but also for the old Qing dynasty which was forced to pay heavy reparations in an international settlement signed in 1901.

Although a century has now passed since these events, the shadow of the Boxer Rebellion remains. On China's National Day, October 1, 2000, the Vatican announced the canonization of Christian martyrs in China, including a number

of Chinese and Europeans killed during the Boxer Rebellion. Angrily, the Chinese government responded that some of those killed in 1900 were engaged in imperialist aggression and some had committed crimes against the Chinese people. Clearly, bitterness against the role of the Christian church, as an extension of Western imperialism in China's not so distant past, remains a part of the Chinese present—and, for some Chinese, the canonization was a reminder of continued Western arrogance when it comes to Chinese affairs.

The past history of Christianity in China is, therefore, very much a sensitive political matter. For researchers, that sensitivity adds to some of the difficulties that are still a part of doing archival research in China today. I have complicated matters by not only wanting to examine the lives of Christian missionaries, some of whom were caught up in the Boxer movement, but also by wanting to study their impact in an extremely sensitive part of China, the Muslim northwest. Before turning to the missionaries, however, I want to briefly introduce the geographic setting of my research as it is a part of China that is not very well known. As part of that overview, I also want to make a few comments on the history of this area, as it relates to my work.

## *Geographic and Historical Setting: Land and People*

China is roughly the size of the continental USA, but unlike America about 60% of China's territory is land traditionally inhabited by non-Chinese peoples—ethnic groups that today are officially known as “national minorities.” These include a number of groups who are Muslim, most of whom live in the northwestern provinces of Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Xinjiang. Altogether, China has an estimated 25 million Muslims, divided among a number of different ethnic groups, the most numerous of which are the Uyghur, Hui, Kazak, and Kirghiz.

The latter groups live in a land of extremes. The north-

west is home to vast deserts—extensions of the Gobi—and to some of the world’s highest mountain ranges on whose slopes nomads continue to graze their herds of sheep and horses. It is a place of quite magnificent scenery; some of it appears as a backdrop in the recently acclaimed film, “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” directed by Ang Li. But the beauty of this region belies the extreme difficulty of travel and living conditions which still pertain even in the 21st century.

Although the topography of the northwest is challenging, a string of oases allowed the development of the so-called Silk Road along which goods moved between Asia and Europe in the days of the Roman Empire. Long distance trade continued over the centuries, as Chinese silks reached Western markets and European glass and gold arrived in Asia. Because the Chinese stages of the Silk Road pass through such arid land, the route is also an archaeological treasure house where hundreds of artifacts have survived to chart the history of one of the world’s greatest trade arteries.

Today the single largest administrative unit in the arid northwest is Xinjiang, on China’s border with Kazakstan. Officially called the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region, it covers one-sixth of China, twice the size of Texas. Its name reflects the numeric and historic importance of the Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim people whose name was added to the region’s official title after 1949.

China’s current interest in Xinjiang revolves around its huge oil and natural gas deposits, and new efforts to develop these are underway. Xinjiang, and its capital city of Urumqi, is rapidly changing, like much of China, yet this economic transformation has not ended Muslim discontent with many Chinese government policies. There is a Muslim separatist movement of indeterminate size, adding to the area’s continued political sensitivity.

However, earlier in the century there was a question whether this area would remain a part of China. Before the current Communist government came to power, the Chinese had virtually no control in the northwest. The revolution of

1911 ended the old dynasty, the Qing, but the new government was weak and unstable. As a result, after 1912, parts of China were dominated by *junfa*, or warlords. In northwestern China, these men constituted the only governmental authority. Until as late as the 1940s., men like Yang Cengxin, Ma Bufang and Ma Chongying ran their respective areas without reference to the central government. Warlord requisitions, press gangs, and periodic bloody warfare made life in the northwest miserable for the local population. For any one travelling in the area, times were especially perilous and uncertain in the early twentieth century.

In sum, between the forbidding terrain, the climate, and the presence of rapacious warlords like young General Ma, the northwest was not, it is fair to say, a very promising mission field—for either Western or Chinese evangelists. Complicating matters further was the general hostility toward Christianity among the northwestern Muslims, and a growing sense of nationalism mixed with resentment over Westerners' power and privilege that made missionaries unwelcome by young Chinese residents of the northwest as well. All of these elements are the backdrop for what I call a Mission to the Muslims, a specialized ministry, within the wider Christian mission field that emerged after the turn of the 20th century. Although a great deal has been written about China missions—some of it scholarly and some by the missionaries themselves—virtually nothing has been written about the Muslim mission effort. It is, in part, to chart that effort that I have begun this project on British women missionaries in the Muslim northwest.

## *Women Evangelists of the China Inland Mission*

The three women who are the focus of the remainder of this article are Evangeline French; her younger sister Francesca, and Alice Mildred Cable, who used Mildred in her publishing

and career—and which is how she is referred to in the following discussion. The tie between these three remarkable women was not only an extraordinary lifelong friendship, but also a shared zeal for facing new challenges. In addition to the warlords and the climate as detailed above, one of their major challenges was, in fact, from their own mission organization, the China Inland Mission [hereafter the CIM]. However, before turning to their relationship with the CIM, let me briefly introduce these three indomitable women.

Evangeline and Francesca French were daughters of British expatriates, who lived first in Algeria, where Evangeline was born in 1869, and then in Europe, where Francesca was born, in Brugges, Belgium, in 1871. The French daughters were educated in Geneva, Switzerland—and, as these periodic moves suggest, the family finances were considerable.

In the 1880s, the Frenches moved again—this time to England, to the southern port of Swansea. The sisters were most distressed to find themselves in a society which suffered, in their eyes, from comparison with the more liberal atmosphere they had enjoyed in Europe. Eva in particular did not like Victorian England's "rigid" society and found the entire atmosphere narrow and provincial.

One outlet for the young women was the church—both were soon drawn to the presentations being given in England by missionaries home from foreign mission fields. Both underwent a "second conversion," an experience common to many who served in British mission organizations. It was after this experience that Eva applied to the China Inland Mission.

Founded in 1865 by James Hudson Taylor, the CIM became the single largest Protestant mission in China. It drew its members from an international pool, accepting not only British citizens, but also Scandinavians, Canadians and Americans as well. It was also unusual in that it was an interdenominational group, asking only that applicants profess basic Protestant Christian beliefs. Further, the CIM was distinguished by its requirement that all its members master the Chinese language, no simple accomplishment, and that all

wear Chinese dress. Although the latter requirement was later dropped, the three women under discussion here chose to wear Chinese style clothing throughout their long stay in China.

Although the CIM had initial reservations about Eva—clothes too fashionable and education rather unconventional—Eva was finally accepted and she left England in 1893. Her first assignment was in Shanxi, northern China.

Eva's apparently conventional mission life was disrupted twice during her first stint in China. Although the CIM records for the period of 1893 to 1900 (currently held at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies) have scant references to the Shanxi missions, letters dating from 1898 indicate that Eva was tangentially caught up in what became a CIM scandal. One of the CIM's Norwegian women members, Miss Anna Jacobson, announced her intention to marry Mr. Cheng Xiuqi, a Chinese Christian evangelist. Inter-racial marriage was not then accepted within the Western community and certainly was not accepted by the conservative CIM leadership. Clearly aware of this, Miss Jacobson resigned and let it be known that she and her new husband planned to go south, to Hunan province, to work as independent missionaries on their own.

Nonetheless, their marriage plans caused an uproar. When it was finally performed (by an American pastor, not a member of the CIM), most of the foreign community refused to attend. Among the few names on the guest list—officially reported to the CIM leadership—was that of Eva French. This was very much an act of courage, and, I believe, of loyalty to someone who had become a close friend within the CIM community. The seriousness of this issue made it seem that there would be consequences for anyone so bold as to show support for Miss Jacobson in these circumstances, but there is nothing to indicate that Eva French was reprimanded for her behavior.

Perhaps one reason for this was the emerging threat of the Boxers, the group mentioned in the introduction. By the summer of 1900, all of the CIM missionaries in Shanxi were

forced to flee their stations, Eva among them. She later wrote of her experience, detailing what must have been a frightening experience. But with other hardy CIM colleagues, she reached the safety of Shanghai, from where she and other survivors took home leave in England. A year later, she returned to continue her service in China.

That same year, the second of the three also left for China. Alice Mildred Cable shared some of the same traits and background as the French sisters. She, too, was from an upper middle class English family, and, like them, she also found conventional British Victorian society narrow and restrictive. After her own “second conversion,” and despite her parents’ clear objections, she applied to the CIM for service in China, having prepared by studying basic medicine at King’s College. In 1901, with the Boxer settlement safely signed, Mildred sailed for China, via the United States. She reached China in early 1902, and was assigned to the same station as Evangeline French. The two women soon formed a strong personal bond, working together to build their mission station at Huozhou [today’s Huoxian] in Shanxi province. When Eva’s mother died in 1908, Francesca was free to pursue her own call to serve in China. In that year, the women became a force of three, known within CIM circles as the Trio. Always together, the women were inseparable for the rest of their lives.

After 1908, the three began a fairly conventional period in their careers as China missionaries. At Huozhou, they ran the mission station which included a girls school of some 200 students, a church, a dispensary and an “opium refuge” where those addicted to the drug could come for treatment. Such activities were part of the social gospel movement embraced by many mission organizations. It was a comfortable life in many ways, and even their local warlord was among the more reform-minded such men—Yan Xishan was even called by some “the Model Governor” for his policies.

It was after some 20 years in China that the Trio decided to volunteer for service in the Muslim northwest, an area they had never visited. They wrote later that they were motivated in

part by the great need of the “unreached” areas—places that had few or no Christian missionaries—and by the lack of volunteers willing to undertake such work. They also believed strongly that mission stations must be run by their Chinese congregations and their own Chinese pastors: as long as they stayed in Huozhou, they felt, they would inhibit this process. They became determined to start an itinerant mission to Muslim women and requested CIM permission to do so in 1922.

Despite the need for missionaries in the northwest, the CIM was not anxious for them to go. As indicated earlier, there were some very good reasons for the CIM not wanting to expand into an area that was notoriously unsettled. There was undoubtedly animated discussion on their unusual request, but the archives are silent on what finally led the CIM to grant permission. We only know that after a frustrating year’s wait, they finally received the answer they had waited for, and began an entirely new chapter in their lives in 1923.

To begin this new venture, they first traveled from their station in Shanxi, across northern China, a journey of some 1500 miles. Initially they were based in western Gansu province, where a small Chinese congregation had already been founded by a Chinese evangelist. But they soon accepted responsibility for itinerant evangelism throughout the northwest, spending the majority of their days on the road, moving from village to village and town to town, preaching where they were welcome, and moving on from any town where they were not. They traveled by mule cart, accompanied by their driver and their cook. They also carried their own food supply as well as scriptures printed in various languages. To enliven their services, they also took a harmonium (a small portable organ) and lantern slides—the latest in technology in its day.

They followed well-established wagon trails used for centuries by merchants and traders, following the route of the old Silk Road. At times, they stayed for longer periods in small oasis towns, living in the caravanserais used by all Silk Road travelers. One such town they came to know well was Dunhuang, in today’s Gansu province, which is famous for its cave

grottoes decorated with priceless Buddhist frescoes. It was while they were there that they were detained by a warlord, General Ma Chongying, who had been shot in both legs and required their services. In writing of this incident afterwards, they make clear the perilous position in which they were placed before making their “get-away” under cover of night.

Despite the threats and challenges represented by warlords and arduous travel conditions, the women learned the art of desert travel and seem to have thrived on it. This was not the easy mission life they had known, but it was a life that allowed them great independence. In the northwest, they could pursue their ministry in their own way. Their choice of ministry was unconventional—and so were some of their methods. For example, one method they invented was what Mildred called “gossiping the gospel.” In this form of outreach, the three women would strike up conversations with women where ever they met them—in the bazaars, washing clothes in the river, or traveling along the same trade routes. They would then invite them to tea at the inn or private home where they were staying. Local rules of reciprocity decreed they would get an invitation in return and they invariably did.

This was apparently a very successful technique. The Trio later wrote that on one tour of itineration they had visited 2,700 homes and conducted 665 meetings. They had also distributed thousands of religious tracts. In comparison, one of the male missionaries I interviewed, Otto Schoerner, who worked in the Xinjiang area during the 1930s, noted that he was never invited into people’s homes—unless they were seeking medical care. Muslim custom meant that only women could interact freely with Muslim women, visiting their quarters and spending hours over tea and bowls of fruit. The Trio’s writings make clear that they admired the strong, capable Muslim women with whom they interacted, and that these friendships often ensured a welcome in towns where they might not otherwise been able to preach the Christian gospel.

The women’s methods, then, appear to have been successful in gaining entrée to Muslim homes, but the number of

conversions among the Muslims in the course of their ministry remains unclear. Rarely do the Trio give details on Muslim converts, and the lack of specific figures raises the question of how successful they were in affecting conversions. In reading through their voluminous writings, there is reference to only three women who appear to have been converted from Islam to Christianity over the course of their ministry.

For comparison, I looked for numbers of converts by men who, in the view of the CIM, were best suited for work in the northwest. Only two men had worked in Xinjiang for any length of time. These were George Hunter and Percy Mather. But here, too, the number of converts was low. By 1937, when a new warlord, Sheng Shicai, ended all missionary efforts in Xinjiang and ordered all of them out of the region, the two men had a total of 19 converts—and it is not clear that these were Muslims.

I widened my search to include the reports of the few Roman Catholic priests who had been assigned to the region, but thus far have no reliable figures for them, either. The only group that appeared to have much success was a CIM affiliate, the Swedish Mission Alliance, based in Kashgar, in westernmost Xinjiang, where a congregation of some 200 adults was formed before it, too, was closed by warlord order in 1937. Even including the Kashgar mission, however, overall it appears that Christian efforts to gain converts in the northwest were not very successful. Were Christian missions then a failure in northwestern China? Were these years wasted efforts, and the missionaries themselves failures?

Perhaps the first thing to note is that overall the Christian enterprise in China never enjoyed its hoped-for success. Less than 1% of the population was ever converted or baptized, despite the large numbers of missionaries and considerable financial investment on the part of Westerners and Christian churches.

Secondly, the trio themselves and some of the others who worked in the northwest between 1900 and 1949 did not see the lack of numbers or reports of converts as a failure. As the

Trio often wrote, their goal was never the conversion of specific individuals or the founding of churches, but rather simply to spread the Gospel as widely as possible. Theirs was truly an itinerant ministry and their goal was “sowing seeds,” as they put it, leaving it to others to someday reap the harvest.

Overall, I believe their greatest success came in Great Britain where they became well-known, popular public speakers. On home leave in England, they were in great demand. They filled church and public halls to overflowing, enthralling audiences as they described their travels and showed their lantern slides. In an era before TV, words served to recapture distant places and peoples, and the women, I believe, did this magnificently. They became celebrities, known in towns all over Britain. In the process, they illustrated what determined and dedicated women could do, adding to the public perception of women as able, capable members of society.

Their popularity as speakers was matched by the growing popularity of their books. From their earliest days in China, they had written for CIM publications, usually to report on their mission station work. But their writing grew increasingly more sophisticated, more polished, and their later books are marked by a flowing, elegant, erudite style, recording in evocative language life along the modern Silk Road. They ultimately wrote over twenty books, several going into many editions.

While mission circles praised their books for their spiritual message, several of their books are also of importance for what they tell us of the history of the northwest. One of the most important of these is *The Gobi Desert*. First published in 1943, it went through 11 printings, and was reissued in 1984 and 1987. It is one of the few existing first-hand accounts of life in Gobi desert towns of the 1930s—and is thus an invaluable source for understanding the Muslim northwest during a difficult, uncertain period for which we have limited sources, in any language.

Despite the women’s importance as travelers and authors, their contribution—even their very presence in the

northwest—has been quite overshadowed by the European men who also traveled the Silk Road at roughly the same time. For example, popular accounts of the modern Silk Road such as Peter Hopkirk’s *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road* feature only the adventures of men like Sven Hedin, the Swedish explorer depicted on the book’s cover, and Sir M. Aurel Stein, both well-funded and well-armed heroes of Silk Road exploration. Hopefully, future histories of the modern Silk Road will include the Trio and their achievements which have been undervalued for the past half century.

Although all three reached retirement age in the 1930s, they showed no indication of ending their itinerations. But the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 led the CIM to evacuate many of its people, including the three women. The Trio returned to England, but not to retirement. They remained active supporters of mission work. Mildred Cable served as a Vice President for the British and Foreign Bible Society until her death in 1952. The French sisters died in 1960, within weeks of each other. Eileen Guy, their adopted daughter who adored her “three mamas,” died in 1998.

## *Conclusion*

The women’s story has much to tell us about the male-dominated world of Christian missions in China—in particular the struggle of single women missionaries to gain their rightful place within mission organizations. The three women’s efforts exemplify the tenacity and courage of many such women whose ministries demonstrated female ability to preach and teach as well as to reach populations not otherwise accessible.

The women’s writings are also a significant historical source—on the history of the northwest but also on the history of Muslim women whose lives are largely missing from existing historical accounts. While some of their many books pertain primarily to religious matters, others of their accounts transcend the boundaries of the mission sphere in China, just

as, I believe, the women's careers in the CIM transcended that organization's conservative and limited vision of the world.

The lives of the Trio also provide an opportunity to re-examine larger historical issues, particularly the significance of the role played by the West and Christianity in China's modern history. Given the continuing sensitivity of Christianity in China today, as seen in the recent canonization of Boxer martyrs, examining what the missions and individual missionaries did and did not do in China may bring a greater measure of understanding to the place of Christianity in China's recent past.

In writing about the Trio, I not only have the opportunity to explore these and other issues, but also to record the story of three remarkable women—and in the process, make my own contribution to the history of Muslim China and the modern Silk Road.