

## FOLLOWING THE TRACES OF CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN NORTHWESTERN CHINA FROM 1920 TO 1936<sup>1</sup>

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Motivated by the regional focus of this conference, we hope to draw some images of Protestant Christians and their church communities within the northwestern provinces in the Republic of China (circa 1920-1936)<sup>2</sup> by relying primarily on two different

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<sup>1</sup> This article is written for the 7th International Conference on the History of Christianity in Modern China: "Regional Perspectives on Studies in the History of Chinese Christianity," on 10-11 June 2011.

<sup>2</sup> There is also some documentation related to Roman Catholic priests and communities working in these regions as well, but we will not mention these people and their circles in this article. The basic reason for doing so is that the main sources of our published materials are produced by British Protestant missionaries and secondary sources including descriptions of their missionary work. We have not had access to other materials written by Roman Catholic missionaries or scholars dealing with their presence in northwestern China, though we understand that this information could be found in appropriate archives, to which we did not have access during the time we were pursuing this research.

kinds of primary sources: those prepared by three unusual British women missionary - educators and subsequently itinerant evangelists supported by the China Inland Mission (hereafter CIM), and some other sources retrieved from Chinese archives in northwestern Chinese provinces. The unusual "Trio"<sup>3</sup> of single women CIM missionaries consisted of Mildred Cable (蓋羣英<sup>4</sup>, 1878-1952), Evangeline French (馮貴珠, 1869-1960) and her younger sister, Francesca French (馮貴石, 1871-1960).<sup>5</sup> Having lived and worked in a girls' school in the city of Huòzhōu (霍州) in Shānxī Province (山西) for the first and rather lengthy period of their missionary service,<sup>6</sup> by 1923 they had successfully applied to become itinerant missionaries

<sup>3</sup> Their lives were so intertwined in the work of missionary-education and the later itinerant evangelism that they have been regularly referred to as "the Trio" by Chinese and other friends as well as by those who have written about them in English. In fact, as we will see, they took on distinct roles within their collaborative work, and so their threesomeness was not expressed in a simple uniformity, but was more of a dynamic collaboration of persons with different gifts. See notes about their being called "the Trio" in Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *Something Happened* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), 113.

<sup>4</sup> In a brief note portraying the meaning of their Chinese names to Anglophone readers, Cable and French referred to three of them in the following manner: Mildred Cable was known as "Gài All Brave" (or more literally, "the hero of the group/community"), Evangeline French as "Féng Precious Pearl", and Francesca French as "Féng Polished Jade" (or more literally, "precious stone"). See these summaries in Cable and French, *Something Happened*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> To distinguish themselves, they also wore different colored robes / dresses, so that they were known as the "Blue" (Mildred Cable) "Brown" (Evangeline French), and "Grey" (Francesca French) ladies by many of their Chinese students and their families. Evangeline was in fact a disciplined evangelist, Mildred was a capable school administrator, a cultural researcher and a creative writer, while Francesca was trained medically (as was Mildred) and was a co-author and editor for most of the more than 20 volumes which were produced along with Mildred. For the nicknames by the colors of their gowns, see Linda Benson, *Across China's Gobi: The Lives of Evangeline French, Mildred Cable, and Francesca French of the China Inland Mission* (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2008), 56.

<sup>6</sup> Evangeline French arrived in that area in 1891, while Mildred Cable was in China only later in 1898, having moved to Huòzhōu just about the time when the tragedies of the anti-foreign riots associated with the Boxer Rebellion were about to break out. Both women's lives were spared, but a number of their colleagues were murdered. The younger sister of Evangeline, Francesca, only arrived after she had completed her duty in caring for her aging mother, making her own trip out to China in 1907. All of them became competent speakers, readers and writers in demotic and classical Chinese. Details of these matters are found in their own autobiographical account, elaborated by Cable and French in *Something Happened*.

in what was then Gānsù Province (甘肅) in the Republic of China.<sup>7</sup> Images and insights from their epic evangelistic journeys led them through what is now Níngxià (寧夏), Qīnghǎi (青海), Mongolia (蒙古), Xīnjiāng (新疆) as well as Gānsù, made accessible publicly through books published in the colorful prose of Cable and the younger French sister, Francesca. What we are interested not only to portray how they themselves characterized the Christian converts and various kinds of Christian communities they met in Northwestern China at that time, but also to counterbalance their mission - minded claims by reports in local archives of the same period, where they are available and / or have been reviewed by others. Obviously, the interests and interpretive perspectives of these sources vary significantly, and so it will be necessary for us to explore some of the hermeneutic challenges of reading and interpreting these sources before we start to describe what they portray to readers from the first decades of the 21st century.

What makes the writings of Cable and French all the more relevant to this project is that they also wrote major biographies about two British male missionary colleagues associated with the CIM who worked as itinerant missionaries in Xīnjiāng: George W. Hunter (胡進潔, 1862-1946)<sup>8</sup> and Percy C. Mather (馬爾昌, 1882-1933).<sup>9</sup> From these works we are able to glean further information about the people-groups and Christian presence in the most northwestern province of the Republic of China, but also once again we will seek to

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<sup>7</sup> This was an arrangement worked out ultimately through the China board of the CIM after several years of consideration. Benson believes it may have been stimulated significantly by a talk given by Dr. Gāo from Gānzhōu which the Trio heard in meetings in Shànghǎi in 1922. From historical records it is clear that the three women only took off from their position as missionary-educators in Huàzhōu in June 1923. Consult Benson, *Across China's Gobi*, 74-76, 80 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *George Hunter: Apostle of Turkestan* (London: China Inland Mission Press, 1948).

<sup>9</sup> Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *The Making of a Pioneer: The Life of Percy Mather* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935).

qualify what is stated by a hermeneutically sensitive reading of these sources, comparing them as well with other local information drawn from archives in that region.

## **I. The Lifestyle of Itinerant Missionaries: Preliminary Reflections**

Missionaries who are not remaining in the same geographical location and with a particularly institutional affiliation — such as those who served as teachers in schools and universities, or as doctors in hospitals, or ministers in specific churches within a particular language group — leave many of us with a conundrum, since most of us live much more sedentary lives and would not necessarily comprehend what would make this form of life even manageable, much less interesting and spiritually significant. As mentioned already, these three women had already become matronly figures by the time that they were allowed to take up the itinerant missionary project that would define their lives within the northwestern provinces of the Republic of China. They did in fact spent significant amounts of time during the cold winter months with two Chinese Christian communities in Gansu province — the first being in Gānzhōu (甘州; currently Zhāngyè [張掖]) which had been established by the medical doctor named Gāo Jīnchéng (高金城), and the latter where they established their long term residence in the town of Sùzhōu (肅州; currently Jiǔquán [酒泉]) — because it was not possible to travel without risking their own lives due to the harshness of the arid and desert climates that surrounded them, and there was a significant lack of roadside facilities for travelers which one might find elsewhere in other parts of China. But when they were "on the road", they travelled in mule or horse driven covered carts, bearing with them copies of the Bible and biblical portions in as many languages as they could obtain from the British Foreign Bible Society. When they entered a village or

a town, they would present themselves to the local officials, and seek to identify hospitable families which would allow them to stay for a while within their region. Many times these persons were identified as they visited and interacted with people in the market places in that village or region; over the years they became aware of the major religious festivals which also took place in those market places at certain times of the year, and so they brought along their Christian contributions to those festivals, getting to know others as they also observed what those from other religious traditions offered and did. Sometimes the local officials were so impressed by these well-educated "righteous women", that they would invite them to stay in their own compounds, and so gave them the opportunity to be honored guests. As a consequence, many times they did not need to seek out others, because once it had been announced that they were staying in the village head's compound, many of the locals would come to pay a visit and learn more about them. They would then arrange to hold reading and music classes for women and children (because many of them still did not receive formal education at that time), teaching them to sing and use their own indigenous talents while Christian themes could be taught; as groups shifted from being curious strangers to persons and families known by name, the Trio would move on to organize special evangelistic and worship services in tent-like shelters which they also carried with them from place to place. They recorded the names of key persons and especially those who had offered them hospitality, going back to visit them whenever their travels brought them into their neighborhood once more, and all the while praying for them, seeking to nudge them toward spiritual concerns, and offering all that they could of themselves — because they were in fact highly educated and gifted elderly women who could offer medical, intellectual and spiritual aids for living well. During the course of their years they learned the Uighur language, and so also had a small part in creating linkages with people who were primarily associating with Muslim religious and cultural institutions.

While this was the general approach which they employed, they were at times necessarily restricted by means of using Chinese in contexts where Tibetan, Mongolian, Uighur, and other languages may be the common language of the people. Sometimes, and particularly within Muslim communities, they would face some significant opposition, often coming from younger persons who were urged to action by their elderly teachers or community leaders. Other times, especially during those traumatic years after 1927 when regional warlords dominated different regions of the vast expanses of the Chinese hinterland, they had to be very observant and determine whether or not they should remain in any particular place, often hearing by means of local rumors or distressed refugees about the current state of affairs in any particular area where they might be heading.

So, in the midst these various contexts and uncertainties, how did they sustain their lives during these major periods of itineration, perhaps as much as six to eight months every year, lasting for nearly fifteen years as they were growing into their 50s and 60s as matronly female missionaries? If we take up principles found in the latter half of the 12th chapter of the New Testament book of Romans, we can perhaps begin to imagine what they took to be life-giving principles of cross-cultural interaction and spiritual engagement.

First of all, they observed all the proprieties which cross-cultural hospitality presupposed,<sup>10</sup> acting as grateful guests, led from place to place by a local cart driver and an accompanying cook, and never travelling with an armed escort.<sup>11</sup> This included devoting themselves to local Christians and granting them honor in the Savior's name.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Promoted in Ro12:13.

<sup>11</sup> As they recorded in their own notes whenever they met up with explorers, political officials and other groups of foreigners, they regularly travelled with an armed escort, and so suggested by this very arrangement that they were not exactly the most hospitable of foreign visitors to any place.

<sup>12</sup> As found in Ro12:10-11.

Whenever and wherever possible, they sought to do "what is right in the eyes of everyone",<sup>13</sup> and so read as much literature about and produced by any particular people group they hoped to meet, in order that they might achieve this high purpose. As much as it was possible, they sought to live at peace with everyone they met,<sup>14</sup> and were regularly willing to associate with people even of relatively low social status.<sup>15</sup>

The fact was that they were able to encounter many people in the midst of living out their lives and facing various needs, because they were not simply "passing through" the region, but sought to remain long enough in any location they felt led to know further, in order to offer to those people some sense of the form of life which their Christian alternative could provide. Being open to whatever transpired, they prayed and adjusted, seeking to "rejoice with those who rejoice" and "mourn with those who mourn",<sup>16</sup> offering Christian solidarity and comfort whenever it was possible and necessary. Even in spite of their status as competent cross-cultural agents, they did not offer proud parades of their skills, but instead sought to live in harmony with others even while there were obvious cultural differences that existed, sharing and reading books and other materials given to them in order that they might become more and more aware of those with whom they had to deal.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of all these ways in which they sought to engage those they met along the road, in market places, and in local settings where they were essentially travelling guests, there were times when they only met with conflict. At times they encountered those who distrusted

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<sup>13</sup> As dictated in Ro12:17.

<sup>14</sup> Quoting from Ro12:18.

<sup>15</sup> As encouraged in Ro12:16.

<sup>16</sup> Principles of interaction found in Ro12:15.

<sup>17</sup> Warnings about pride and conceit are found in Ro12:16.

them from the outset and opposed their Christian worldviews (particularly in certain Muslim villages, but sometimes also among other groups as well). At those points they restrained themselves, not seeking to repay evil for evil, and not responding vengefully to those who mistreated them,<sup>18</sup> but did whatever they believed prudence required of them in Christ's Spirit. At times this involved responding to curses with blessings, and to inhospitality with unexpected generosity.<sup>19</sup> Other times they recognized the dangers that loomed ahead of them and simply left. In this they knew that ultimately it was the Sovereign God Who would avenge their lives, and so it was within the ambit of their highest duty to the Living Lord to "not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good".<sup>20</sup> The fact that they became known as "the righteous ladies" among some of those who came to know them suggests that they were generally successful in achieving these high purposes even in the midst of very difficult circumstances and dangerous political contexts.

## **II. The Character of the Historical Sources Related to Northwestern China**

Before we pursue detailed accounts of Christians and churches within the northwestern regions where these CIM missionaries and others worked and lived, we should characterize the nature of the sources produced by Cable and the younger French sister, and indicate what can be drawn from archival and secondary sources available to us at this time.

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<sup>18</sup> Reflecting imperatives in Ro12:17 and 19.

<sup>19</sup> As encouraged in Ro12:14.

<sup>20</sup> Reflecting teachings found in Ro12:20-21.



Most of the primary sources co-authored by Mildred Cable and Francesca French are strong in story-telling and sometimes less than precise in identifying the historical period or specific dates in which events occurred. Even in their autobiographical account elaborated in *Something Happened*, there are only the slightest clues regarding the age of persons (including themselves) and the length of connections they had with various people, communities and institutions. From their first written account of their journeys in the northwest, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, one can only discern that the story must be about travels made before 1927, when the book was published, for there is no precise statement about the period the work describes or any historical details that can give the reader an easy temporal anchor in relationship to their vivid stories. While it is the case that their stories are often captivating and written with great literary flair and skill, this lack of historical documentation makes the effort of identifying specific details of their missionary trips somewhat difficult. Fortunately, the extensive historical study produced by Linda Benson helps to overcome this major hindrance, providing not only distinct dates for all the major periods of their itinerant missionary work in northwest China, but also adding numerous interpretive details which bring much background information which reveals more about their own personalities and some of the people with whom they worked most closely.

Having stated this, we do have primary sources prepared by Cable and French regarding their two male CIM missionary colleagues, Percy Mather and George Hunter. The volume on Mather appeared relatively earlier in 1935, and consists mostly of long quotations from his personal letters while he was living and working in central and then (for the majority of his career) in northwestern China. Writing with the understanding in the mid-1930s that certain Christian converts among Muslims would have their safety compromised if their names and details about their lives were too explicit, Cable and French wrote only indirectly and indistinctly about those converts and their

Christian churches at that time. Quotations from letters referring to them are presented without any elaboration, and so these references are in and of themselves inadequate for making any interpretive advances. Though the book itself is relatively long, stretching to nearly 290 pages in length, a reader senses that the main purpose of the authors was to honor their missionary colleague who had died tragically in 1933, and so it was not their intention to do too much more than that. Notably, the work on George Hunter was of a different sort. Published thirteen years after the volume on Mather and so also after the Second World War, the authors wrote more candidly about their evaluations of both Hunter and Mather, and probably felt that everything which had transpired in the 1930s in northwestern China had been swept away by the ravages of war, so that they were no longer reticent about many details related to some converts and the Christian communities which were present in Xīnjiāng. Though the historical details are still not many, and this second book is much shorter (just 107 pages in length), there are more concrete facts found within this volume which provide readers with some insights into the character of certain Christian converts and the quality and structures of Christian communities established as early as before the 1911 Revolution as well as the one in Urumqi which Hunter and Mather had seen come to life.

There are also some archival sources which reveal certain details about the Christian missionaries, their mission stations and some of the churches found in Gānsù and Xīnjiāng. While archives in Gānsù can be seen when proper permission is granted, it is unfortunate that since the interracial riots occurred in the northwest and elsewhere in China on and after July 5th, 2009, it is now very difficult for non-local scholars to have access to archival documents from the Xīnjiāng Provincial Archives. Nevertheless, some scholars from the region have been able to do more work within them over the years. It is notable that the scholar, Mulati Heiniyati (木拉提·黑尼亞提), has studied the history of various kinds of Christian missionaries in Xīnjiāng, using materials not only from original missionary sources, but also

comparing and contrasting them with information drawn from local archival sources.<sup>21</sup> Instead of discussing the missionaries' failures or successes, Heiniyati has focused on elaborating their efforts in social services, including printing and publishing in Uigher and other languages, as well as their contribution to the personal and educational development of various Uighur persons. Besides Heiniyati, Prof. Fáng Jiànchāng (房建昌) has collected materials concerning both Roman Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity in Xīnjiāng and provided his own interpretations of their significance.<sup>22</sup> In addition to materials retrieved from provincial and local archives, there are also some local chronicles or memoirs which have recorded details about religious events and persons, some of them including statements about these Christian missionaries. In the book Zhāng Dàjūn has written entitled *Seventy Years of Instability in Xīnjiāng* (《新疆風暴七十年》),<sup>23</sup> Zhāng mentioned some details related to the Trio's visit with the CIM colleagues in Urumqi.

Nevertheless, a careful reader can also find errors in these secondary sources, and so further work needs to be done to correct some of their claims by means of having access to the first hand materials produced by Cable and French. Also, there has been relatively little effort spent on the description of Christian converts and the Christian communities which were found in the Gānsù and Xīnjiāng regions during the period of 1920 to 1936, and so we hope that in this way our study can provide an initial overview that is not found elsewhere. What we offer in the following accounts is only a

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<sup>21</sup> 木拉提·黑尼亞提：〈近代西方內地會傳教士在新疆的活動〉，《西域研究》第4期（2001年），頁94~100；〈新疆內地會傳教士傳教經歷及其中外文姓名的勘同〉，《西域研究》第4期（2003年），頁83~90；〈傳教士與近代新疆社會〉，《世界宗教研究》第1期（2005年），頁63~72。

<sup>22</sup> 房建昌：〈近代新疆基督教史的研究及史料〉，《新疆大學學報》（哲學社會科學版）第4期（1998年），頁62~66。

<sup>23</sup> 張大軍：《新疆風暴七十年》（台北：蘭溪山出版社，1981）。

preliminary summary of various sources, but it can perhaps serve as a framework for future research that does more careful work in local and provincial archives in northwestern China as well as in the CIM missionary archives in the UK.

### III. How and What the Trio Portrayed about Christians and Christian Communities in Lánzhōu, Gānzhōu and Sùzhōu

When the Trio left to travel toward northwestern China in June 1923, they were headed first of all to the capital of Gānsù Province, the city of Lánzhōu; there the China Inland Mission was already resident, having established the Borden Memorial Hospital as well as a boy's school early in the century.<sup>24</sup> Though Cable and French claimed that they were struck with "the way in which the Christian community had impressed itself on the civic life of the town" by means of these institutions,<sup>25</sup> it is hard to imagine that the community itself was very vibrant and stable. There was a large and modern iron bridge that spanned the large Yellow River which passed beside the old city at that time, built by American support and Belgian engineers; but there was little else that appeared to be modern at the time. The official residence in the town was still the traditional *yámén* (衙門), and though it was the largest town in the province at the time, it may not have shown much impact from the growing concern for "becoming modern", as happened in other parts of China during the period when the May Fourth Movement's influences were popular. Rather than staying in that major city where there were already others from the

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<sup>24</sup> George E. King, "The Borden Memorial Hospital in China," *The Muslim World* 8:2 (July 1918): 282-84.

<sup>25</sup> Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia: An Account of Journeys in Kansu, Turkestan and the Gobi Desert* (Boston: Houghton, 1927), 29.

CIM present, the Trio travelled by land to the city of Gānzhōu,<sup>26</sup> and there they made contact with a Chinese Christian community which had been established among a multi-cultural population by the Chinese medical doctor, Gāo Jīnchéng.<sup>27</sup> A Chinese citizen from Hénán (河南) province, Dr. Gāo situated himself in a Chinese temple precinct and began offering free medical services to the needy and poor; by this means he became a well-known figure within the region.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, because he also sought to express the Christian message to his patients, it became known that he was a Christian, and so some Chinese persons who worshipped local spirits in the town's temples were initially opposed to his residing there for this reason. In spite of this public threat, he had earned the respect of others, so that when his opponents mobilized a group of citizens to press him to leave, a wealthy patient who had been healed through his medical skills supported his presence in the town, and so the crowd dispersed.

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<sup>26</sup> The story of their travels to Lánzhōu and beyond to Gānzhōu was recorded in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 23-38.

<sup>27</sup> The following account summarizes the stories presented in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 38-43.

<sup>28</sup> In their first publication related to their itinerant missionary work, entitled *Dispatches from North-west Kansu*, Mildred Cable and Francesca French take two of the 16 "dispatches" to describe the life and work of this unusual medical doctor, Gāo Jīnchéng (whom they refer to as "Dr. Kao" and the "Evangelist" within this particular volume). Having grown up in a village home with parents who lived from their farm, the young boy by age 15 had found Christian missionaries he had met as a boy in Hénán Province kind and wise, and so he was given the chance to have a Christian education. His father was particularly opposed, but the young Gāo Jīnchéng prayed, and after several months of submitting to his father's authority by staying at home, a letter was received from Dr. Sydney Carr, who served as a medical superintendent for a "mission hospital" which the China Inland Mission has established in Kāifēng (開封). In spite of some stiff family opposition, the young man committed himself to this new possibility for learning, and ended up spending seven years in training and five more years in service to the hospital as a tested doctor. As a consequence, though he could have had a lucrative medical clinic of his own before he was 30 years old, Dr. Gāo Jīnchéng chose to take up the opportunity offered by the CIM to set up a medical clinic in northwest China, where there was much spiritual need. The details of this story expressed in evangelical Christian terms can be found in Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *Dispatches from North-west Kansu* (London: China Inland Mission, 1925), 60-69. A picture of the doctor and of the mission which was set up in Gānzhōu is found between pages 68 and 69.

This illustrates the courage required by any missionary in the region, as well as the kind of public conflicts and opposition Christians in the Gānsù did face, forms of opposition which Christians would interpret as part of the "spiritual battles" they would have to wage in order to be fruitful and effective Christians in any place.

Later, he was offered a place outside of the temple which included a house and land, Dr. Gāo purchased the place and moved over to this new residence, ready to make it into a more suitable and attractive "mission compound". Rebuilding the small house which was on the property, he and others who had joined him as Christians during Sunday worship held on the property build up a "convenient dispensary, waiting-room and guest-hall", with a library and reading room open to the public on entering the premises.<sup>29</sup> Within a few years the group had also built a school building with enough classrooms to house students whom the Trio would bring into the compound when they were present to teach biblical lessons.<sup>30</sup> What the Trio found in 1923 was more than a fledgling church community; it was a Christian community which had many members and seekers who joined for Sunday services, but also had a core of committed leaders and Christian care givers who lived communally at the mission compound site. According to the Trio, the Christian community they met later in the year of 1923 was comprised of mixed group of Chinese persons originally from six out of the 18 provinces of the Republic of China.<sup>31</sup> Most of them were younger persons, though there was a married

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<sup>29</sup> A picture of an external image of the front of this Chinese style building and its compound is found in Cable and French, *Dispatches from North-west Kansu*, 68-69.

<sup>30</sup> According to the women authors, the mission compound "became the most attractive building in the city" so that the "daily Peking newspaper" was "posted outside the main entrance" along with a blackboard "holding special items of news". These were immediately in front of "the book-room, where Christian papers and a library were accessible to anyone who cared to use them". The courtyard was "planted with trees, and was sanded to make a play-ground for the Kanchow street children". See these descriptions in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> As claimed in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 50.

couple by the name of Liú who were middle-aged, the husband serving as one of the elders of the church community.<sup>32</sup> This couple was among those who most faithfully supported the Trio whenever they were in the region, to the point that Mr. Liú sometimes joined them on parts of their evangelistic travels throughout other parts of the region.

The relationships among the key members of this church and their economic arrangements are worth considering, since they appeared to adopt patterns of life that paralleled some of the features of one form of the early New Testament church described in Acts 2. We have this description from Cable and French.<sup>33</sup>

From the large circle [of the Christians worshipping on Sunday at the Mission Compound]... there had emerged a small group, whose whole time was given to the work and service of the Church. They lived with the Doctor on a communal basis. One of them had been trained to act as medical assistant, another was a very capable business man, through whose hands all moneys passed, and by whom the general accounts were kept. All medical fees, together with profits resulting from the Church-owned farm and flocks of sheep, were placed in a common fund, and used at the discretion of a small financial committee. It was by this means that they were able to meet the expenses incurred in connection with the Bible School, which was opened on our arrival.

From the depictions of indigenous churches we have directly from the writings of the Trio, this is the most vibrant and independent of the Christian congregations which they encountered, and it was distinctive not only in being communally organized, but also in being almost completely Chinese in the ethnic makeup of its members. While the

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<sup>32</sup> The full description of the Chinese Christian Community is presented in a chapter entitled simply "A Chinese Community". See Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 49-54.

<sup>33</sup> Quoting from Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 50.

descriptions above illustrate the organizational principles and diligence of the Christian community in the city, it was of particular significance that after the Trio had been interacting with Dr. Gāo and that Christian community for a full year, they were able to hold a baptismal ceremony where fifty adult men and women publicly proclaimed their allegiance to the Christian Savior by being immersed in the waters of a stream which passed beside the northern gate of the town.<sup>34</sup> There was every indication, then, that the efforts of both the missionaries and the local Christian community were culturally transformative, and they made it clear in subsequent plans that they had intentions to extend their influences even further.

As the missionary ladies were able to discover in the time that they resided within the city of Gānzhōu, it was a cross-road town through which people of many cultures made their ways. "From the east and west Tibetans and Mongolians constantly pour into and cross the country. From the north the Moslem Turk introduces an element of aggressive domination. For the past decade a steady stream of Russian immigration has flowed through. By the southern route men from every other province of China come in pursuit of adventure or fortune."<sup>35</sup> As they were able to notice, all of the high governmental positions in the city at that time were occupied by Muslim men, whose guards were noted for their cruelty and corruption.<sup>36</sup> Noted for its many temples, the majority of the most notable among them being Buddhist temples, including one of the famous sleeping Buddha of immense proportions.<sup>37</sup> Though these temples and their gardens within them were generally used as places of relaxation and quiet

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<sup>34</sup> The event is described in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 73-74.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted from Cable and French, *Dispatches from North-west Kansu*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Described in Cable and French, *Dispatches from North-west Kansu*, 18-19.

<sup>37</sup> They characterize the "Sleeping Buddha" as being "the larges in China" and stretching for a distance of 120 feet, and lying on a small platform, the image is forty feet high at its highest point. See the description in Cable and French, *Dispatches from North-west Kansu*, 23-24.



conversation, some also had residing Buddhist monks and nuns, including among them not only ethnic Chinese, but also those from Tibetan lamaseries who came as pilgrims.<sup>38</sup> It was in this context that they had come to do their Christian evangelization, and so the city environment not only provided their first contact with creative efforts successfully achieved by local Christians, but also a wide-ranging and multi-ethnic cultural setting where they could also learn about the different ways of life led by these various kinds of people.

As mentioned previously, the Chinese Christians belonging to the Gānzhōu church began to plan with the Trio to extend their Christian outreach to those cities who did not have resident Christians among them. According to the account published by Cable and French in 1927, a "Pioneer Band" of thirty Christian persons including the Trio, Dr. Gāo, and twenty six others was set apart to initiate and establish a new Christian compound in the next largest city northwest of their location, the town of Sùzhōu.<sup>39</sup> With determined effort the foreign ladies and their Christian cohort travelled into this city which was described as most "un-Chinese settlement" that they had seen up to that point in their itinerant careers, because of its large contingent of Uighur (or "Turki") speaking merchants who populated the market places and resided in a separate part of the town dominated by Muslim residents.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, they were able to locate a suitable place, owned by a person named "Chang" which contained several large courtyards, making it possible to create school rooms, a chapel, and

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<sup>38</sup> This is described in a chapter entitled "The City of Temples", which ends not with further descriptions of these temples, but of a story showing how Chinese and Muslim members of the city might be caught up in troubles due to opium addiction and gambling. See Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 76-82. For stories about the Tibetan pilgrims and how the Trio engaged them, see the chapter entitled "Among The Pilgrims" in Cable and French, *Something Happened*, 179-212.

<sup>39</sup> The formation of the "Pioneer Band" is described in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 74.

<sup>40</sup> As noted in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 94.

have additional buildings set aside for residences.<sup>41</sup> Once settled into their new residence, the Trio and all the other women in the Pioneer Band began to visit each home in the city, and by this means not only demonstrated that they were civil neighbors, but also presented themselves as Christians who hoped to do some good among the residents of the town.<sup>42</sup> It would be in this town that the Trio made its most lasting impressions among the residents, because it was here that they maintained the missionary base from which they travelled throughout the region during the next eleven years, whenever they were in China.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The procurement of the home of "Chang Si Yeh" is described in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 96-98.

<sup>42</sup> This method of neighborly engagement and open-hearted presentation of themselves the Trio would later refer to as part of their "gossiping the Gospel" methodology. They would often start by complementing a person they met on something they were doing, wearing, or reading, and then follow the conversation wherever it would lead them, looking for opportunities to describe their own Christian work and related values within the natural flow of the conversation. In this way they were generally seen as hospitable and pleasant persons, educated and interesting to those around them, and so friendships were established which could lead to other opportunities to discuss matters of spiritual value at later times. See this approach described in the context of the house visitation in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 102-103.

<sup>43</sup> During this period they went back and forth to England at least three times, generally moving across land by means of the Siberian railroad or other forms of transportation. Nevertheless, whenever they returned to China, they returned to their base in Sūzhōu until the political instability was so intense that it was no longer possible to reside there safely. From that time on, essentially starting in 1936, they returned to England and took up other jobs as international Christian advocates associated with a number of institutions, but most prominently with the British and Foreign Bible Society. During those latter years Cable and French continued to collaborate on a number of book projects, and so became prolific authors well-recognized for their Christian contributions as well as their insightful understandings of the multi-cultural contexts and historical details of northwestern China.

#### IV. Christians and Christian Communities in Xīnjiāng

More than a decade before George Hunter had entered Ürümqi (also referred to as Dīhuà [迪化 / Tihwa] and Hóngmiàozi [紅廟子], subsequently simply "Urumqi")<sup>44</sup> to initiate his own form of itinerant missionary work, a team of Swedish missionaries had established themselves in the city of Kashgar, located at the far western part of Xīnjiāng, at the western lip of the Taklamakan Desert Basin. According to the Swedish Orientalist, Gunnar Valfrid Jarring (1907-2002), these Swedish missionaries were well educated and gifted, serving not only by means of medical and educational work, but also as architects, carpenters, translators, and linguists.<sup>45</sup> Already by the time that George Hunter visited them during the summer and early fall of the fateful year of 1911, they had established a few churches which included Muslim converts and seekers.<sup>46</sup> From Hunter's own description of that time, he was greatly encouraged by what he learned linguistically, culturally, and spiritually from those Swedish colleagues and their Christian converts.

As it happened in the course of the development of the CIM compound in Urumqi, there was opportunity to build a chapel along with basic residences, so that already by 1916 Mather refers to a "chapel" which needed repair.<sup>47</sup> Notably, however, much more had

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<sup>44</sup> These reference terms in different languages suggest that the cross-cultural divides during that time were still very significant. See these names identified in Cable and French, *George Hunter*, 40. The name Ürümqi (which is regularly spelled as "Urumqi" in English) is a Mongolian word meaning "beautiful pasture", while the name Dīhuà was given by the Qiánlóng emperor, and the "red temple" name was apparently a reference term employed by carters and other commoners.

<sup>45</sup> Consult Gunnar Jarring, *Return to Kashgar: Central Asian Memoirs in the Present*, trans. Eva Claeson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1986). These major social functions within the ministries of the Swedish missionaries' work is also described and confirmed from local archival sources by 黑尼亞提: 〈近代西方內地會傳教士在新疆的活動〉, 頁94~100。

<sup>46</sup> This is described briefly in a letter by Hunter, found in Cable and French, *George Hunter*, 46. There he states, "It impressed me to see the numbers of men, women and children who came to the services for Turki Mohammedans every Sunday."

<sup>47</sup> As mentioned in Cable and French, *The Making of a Pioneer*, 175.

been done by the winter of 1929, because in anticipation of the winter visit and stay of their female CIM colleagues, the Trio, Hunter and Mather arranged for a new three-room house to be built,<sup>48</sup> and the compound itself to be refurnished, including the building where the Christian community was being housed. In fact, due to the diligence of the evangelization work of both Hunter and Mather, and particularly based on the commitments of Mather to initiate and establish an active Christian church within their city based within they compound, a larger church building was also constructed,<sup>49</sup> so that during the time when the Trio visited and began visitation ministries to the local women, the Sunday worship services swelled to include as many as three hundred persons.<sup>50</sup> From the minor details we can gather from the volumes written about Hunter and Mather, it is apparently the case that this Christian community was using Chinese, but was a multi-ethnic church community which included some of the converted and baptized believers who had been drawn to the Christian Savior by these two CIM male missionaries, but also was constituted by people from various levels of the local society. In this sense, it was a congregation of an unusual inter-cultural sort for its own time, but so

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<sup>48</sup> Documented in Cable and French, *George Hunter*, 78-79.

<sup>49</sup> Noted in a description of the church in Urumqi in 1929, also confirming the number of persons involved, but without any elaboration in Cable and French, *The Making of a Pioneer*, 244-45.

<sup>50</sup> In their description of the comparison of the characters of Hunter and Mather, Cable and French underscore that it was Mather who was eager to have the converted join together in a church community which included other Christians who transferred their membership from churches elsewhere in the country, and so ultimately the delegation of authority in administering ecclesiastical affairs was handed over to those leaders in the church, allowing for Christian ministry to continue even while the two male missionaries were away on their itinerant evangelistic trips. Though Hunter had already seen two persons converted and baptized as early as 1908, he was far less willing to have such a community established, because he feared for their falling away due to the manifest social pressures within the largely Muslim cultural environment, but Mather realized that they could only become strong if they were permitted to join in a vital Christian community. It was on this basis then that a "fairly large body of communicants was established, some of whom were cultured men holding important posts under the Government, and some of whom were women," as cited by Cable and French in *George Hunter*, 84-85.

far we have no further details drawn from other archival sources about the nature of the community and its communicants.

In addition to this Chinese-speaking multi-cultural Christian community which grew up under the nurture of Percy Mather and local Christian leadership, both Hunter and Mather were aware of another unusual set of church communities created by the political troubles of the atheistic regime in the Soviet Union. As documented in notes written down by a visiting Protestant pastor who met Hunter in 1944, there were descriptions of "Russian churches at Kuldja, Chuguchak and other centres" which had formed "strict Christian communities" due to the "severe persecution by the Reds".<sup>51</sup> He and Mather has supported them during the 1930s by providing Russian Bibles and hymnals, hoping to nurture the "spiritual welfare of the five thousand Russian Nonconformists" resident in northern and northwestern Xīnjiāng. Here the radical nature of the international political situation and the Stalinist policies in the Soviet Union created a condition where international refugee churches had been established, and so the itinerant exercises of the two CIM missionaries made it possible for them not only to discover that these communities existed within their region, but also that they could provide special help in offering Bibles and spiritual literature which could help them in their desperate plight for survival. It should be noted that these too were part of the Christian presence in northwestern China, though once more we have no further information from current fieldwork or archival documentation to know if these communities still exist within Chinese borders.

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<sup>51</sup> Quotations here and below come from Cable and French, *George Hunter*, 100.

## V. Selective Stories about Chinese and other Christian Converts from the Multi-Cultural Settings of Northwestern China

The summary describes the nature of the Christian communities found in the provinces of Gānsù and Xīnjiāng during the period between the 1911 Revolution and the initiation of World War II in the late 1930s was unusual and sometimes culturally complex. The multi-cultural realities of the region contained also numerous expressions of various kinds of religious traditions besides Christianity (which also had its different forms, but not so obviously in that region), including Chinese Daoist communities, Buddhist temples with monks and nuns hailing from Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian ethnic groups, as well as folk religious traditions oftentimes tied to specific superstitious attitudes which affected the daily lives of many. There is also mention within the writings of the CIM missionaries of extensive groups of Muslim peoples who came from different ethnic groups, but when compared with contemporary sources on minorities in Xīnjiāng, the different kinds of people they encountered were probably not so numerous as the 21st century population statistics indicate.<sup>52</sup> Those they did meet included a majority who were Uighur (Uyghur, referred to as "Turki" in their writings), with others from many smaller ethnic groups including Kazaks, Huí, Kirgiz and Tajik among other less numerous nomadic tribes. Though there are numerous stories told by Cable and French in their books related to their encounters with various kinds of persons in northwestern China, we will focus here on just a few representative vignettes dealing with converts to Christianity. They reveal something more about the cross-cultural challenges, faced by both missionaries and converts, as well as the unusual character of many of these converted persons. Nevertheless,

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<sup>52</sup> A website dealing with "The 13 Nationalities of Xinjiang" indicates what some recent demographic statistics reveal. See <<http://www.xinjianguide.com/shouye/nationalities.htm>>

it should be highlighted that the Trio was particularly interested in the conditions and fate of female children and mature women within these ethnic communities. Their interest in these women came about not only because of their own extensive experience in other parts of China with young female students and their parents, but also because of the cultural limitations which they and local women had to endure. The missionaries readily accepted these limitations, because this gave them access as foreign women to the temple sites, homes and harems of many married women whom they regularly sought out during their itinerations.

More than once there are recordings in various parts of their writings about surprising encounters with those who sought them out because of a tract they had read in their own language, or Bible portions which they had received and read, or physical help they had received due to the medical skills of the Trio or Christian doctors they had met. Among these persons were Tibetan lamas, Uygur businessmen, Muslim women, and children derived from racially mixed marriages who were cast out or sold by their fathers to others.<sup>53</sup> Whether or not the particular persons who actually sought out the Trio during their travels or in their residence in Sùzhōu were ultimately converted to Christian faith is often left as a moot question in these stories, because many times they had no further contact with the missionary women. Nevertheless, these stories are numerous enough to note at the outset as a source for further study. The intensity of some of the discussions, and the practical wisdom displayed by the women

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<sup>53</sup> As a matter of principle, the female Trio regularly visited other religious sites related to Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist temples as well as to mosques and their schools, whenever they could, in order to speak with the leaders and build bridges of mutual understanding, respect, and friendship whenever it was possible. Specific dialogues with various "living Buddhas" from lamaseries, Buddhist and other pilgrims to various temples and temple fairs, as well as mullahs from different Muslim regions, reveal much about the nature of their inter-religious interests and their Christian approaches to these various religious representatives, but this would take us into another area of discussion which we will not discuss here.

missionaries when they faced confrontations with opposing religious leaders demonstrates that they had to be not only culturally informed, but also very astute and clever in their interactions over religious worldviews and discussions over the value of varying ways of living spiritually. At one point in the early 1930s they had effectively been made prisoners of one of the younger warlords of the northwest provinces, self-proclaimed as "General" Mǎ Zhòngyīng (馬仲英), because their medical talents were needed among the wounded and sick within his army.<sup>54</sup> Having served in this role humbly for a good number of months, they conceived of a way of leaving the camp under the pretense of making a smaller trip, and so were spared the terrible fate of that warlord and his military forces, which were within a year exterminated by armed forces sent from Běijīng.

It is no wonder that after Mildred Cable and the French sisters returned to England in the late 1930s, they were hailed not only as bold missionaries, but also were considered to be unusually well informed intellectuals related to the people and history of the northwest. In this regard, Cable's scholarly contributions were particularly notable.<sup>55</sup> Once their volume on the Gobi Desert was published in 1942, which became an immensely by popular book read far beyond normal Protestant circles, and including the Queen of England, the ladies began to be honored in ways that indicated their remarkable achievements. Cable was subsequently granted the Lawrence of Arabia Memorial Medal from the Royal Central Asian Society in 1943, and in the same year all three women were given the Livingstone Medal from the Royal Scottish Geographical Society.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> See their account of these experiences in the chapter, "Among the Bandits" in Cable and French, *Something Happened*, 215-86.

<sup>55</sup> See summary statements in this regard covered by Benson in the tenth chapter of her work: "New Ventures, Further Travels" as found in Benson, *Across China's Gobi*, 216-39.

<sup>56</sup> As documented in Benson, *Across China's Gobi*, 221-22.



Without a doubt the most prominent stories of converted Christian women were those whose lives were described in monographs completed by Cable and French after they returned to England from China for the last time. The first to receive such attention was a young student whose natural father was Tibetan and mother was Mongolian. Born out of wedlock, she was ultimately sold to a shrewish Chinese woman who lived in Sùzhōu, but once that woman realized that the young female child she had bought was both deaf and dumb, she forced her out onto the streets to beg for a living, allowing her only the privilege of being able to have a roof over her head when she slept.<sup>57</sup> Named "Lonely One" or "Destitute One" (Guǎguǎ / 寡寡) by her step-mother, this handicapped child ultimately came to discover the kindnesses of the three English women missionaries, and so became a regular visitor to their school premises in the city in order to obtain food, physical care, and have a place to rest securely away from public crowds and other beggars. Her case was so unusual that the women missionary were moved to do something radical, and arranged ultimately to purchase the female beggar from her step-mother. With the help of the local government official, they were legally able to adopt her as their own daughter. Taking the name Topsy, she was officially the daughter of Mildred Cable, but in actuality she experienced a family life with three mothers, and lived with them for the balance of her life as their treasured daughter.<sup>58</sup> Due to arrangements in hiring special teachers for such a handicapped person, Topsy later learned how to read and speak, in spite of her afflictions,

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<sup>57</sup> The account of her life is presented in a monograph of just over 200 pages, written by Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *The Story of Topsy: Little Lonely of Central Asia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1937).

<sup>58</sup> According to Benson, she joined her three mothers when they returned to England in 1936, and lived with them until they all passed away. Subsequently, Topsy was the sole inheritor of the Trio's estate, and so it was arranged for her to be cared for by the Salvation Army in London after their deaths. She continued to live under the care and supervision of the Salvation Army until her death in 1998. See Benson, *Across China's Gobi*, 237-39.

and so could participate not only in educational and religious activities, but even could articulate herself briefly in public settings. Though the nature of her life and the outcome of her association with the three CIM female missionaries was unusual and very personal, the book written about her was meant also to highlight the plight of many female children in northwestern China who suffered immensely due to the patriarchal values which placed them on the bottom of family responsibilities, often making them mere commodities to be sold in order to help other family members survive.

Another girl beggar whose life was transformed by the care provided by Christian institutions in Sùzhōu was a person given the Christian name "Grace". Born of Mongolian parents who sold her due to their own penury, this orphaned girl went through the terrors of being an unwanted person, and ended up suffering from accidents and the cruelty of others, so that even one of her feet was amputated. After she knew that both her parents had passed away, even though she had already been a street child for many years, she was desperate to find shelter and security, and was led to the Christian compound in the city where she met other children like herself who were being cared for by the CIM Trio.<sup>59</sup> They arranged for her to live with one of the Chinese Christian women belonging to their church community, and so she was given a new home and a Christian education under the guidance of the Trio and other Christian teachers in that school. Her fate having been substantially transformed due to these merciful acts of kindness and years of living as a member of a Christian family, Grace herself also became a Christian, and later married a young Chinese Christian man met within the circles of Christians in that area. From the vantage point of the women missionaries, this was a success story of immense

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<sup>59</sup> For further details about the life of this female Mongolian convert, consult the work by Mildred Cable and Francesca French, *Grace, Child of the Gobi* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).

importance, because it demonstrated how a person who was hopeless within the context of her natural family and the surrounding culture could have a transformed life. It led to her personal strength and cultural fruitfulness as a Christian person, making it possible for her to become a Christian wife, and a member of a vital local Christian community.

As has been mentioned above in the accounts of Christian communities in Xīnjiāng, there were various kinds of converts to Christianity who joined in churches in Kashgar, Yarkand, and Urumqi, but many of their stories have not been told very openly. One that was made explicit occurred in 1914 when Percy Mather was itinerating with another CIM missionary in Xīnjiāng, while residing temporarily in a village named Pulungi. As the other missionary named Moore was preaching about the Christian "message of salvation", an older man in the crowd, presumably a Chinese person (as seen from the quotation below), was visibly excited by the missionary's words, and so continued to state in his own language out loud even in the midst of the crowd, and in response to the preaching, "Why! It's just the same. There's no difference. It's exactly alike."<sup>60</sup> When this same gentleman later visited the missionaries, they asked many questions about his understanding of the Christian message of salvation, and after listening for some time, he insisted more than once that "We are brothers!" What they discovered is that he had never previously heard this message preached in public, but he had been given a Gospel of John many years earlier by George Hunter, when the latter has passed through his village. In the words of the man, quoted from a letter by the missionary, A. Moore, the following account emerged:<sup>61</sup>

[The elderly man] told the following story: "Seven or eight years ago a foreigner passed through our village on his way to Sinkiang [Xīnjiāng].

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<sup>60</sup> Summarizing the story as found in Cable and French, *George Hunter*, 86-88.

<sup>61</sup> Quoting from Cable and French, *George Hunter*, 87-88.

I had been working at the farm and was returning home late. While crossing the street this foreigner called me and gave me a book, saying, 'Old gentleman, I want to give you this book. Take it home and read it. It contains the true doctrine!' He was an elderly man with a beard and I have never seen him again, but...I took the book home and as I read its pages I destroyed my idols, I tore my household gods off the door and burned them, and I severed my connections with the three secret societies to which I belonged. Since then I have worshipped the God of that book.... [So] when I came into the village this evening and came up to listen to your preaching, I was astonished when I heard you, for all you said was just the same as that book. There was no difference. It was exactly alike."

Certainly this was not a normal experience during trips of itinerant evangelization, but it was an indication that "sowing the seed" of the Christian Gospel by means of preaching and passing out Biblical portions and other tracts could have a very significant impact among some of those who received these materials.

Though there were also Muslim converts to Christian faith among those in the churches within Xīnjiāng, whose stories were generally not told, Cable and French did reveal some selective stories of a few, particularly among the women they met, who indicate some of the ways that Muslims might also become "secret believers" within the Muslim cultural context. It was obviously told also to indicate the misery faced by many women living within various people groups in northwestern China, and so it bears repeating because of the emphasis the Trio made in explaining the plight of such persons. A young daughter of a rich Muslim merchant, Patima was a child bride of a child husband who took advantage of his marital rights and, after several weeks, sold her to others.<sup>62</sup> Before she was even

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<sup>62</sup> As told in Cable and French, *Something Happened*, 283-86. Subsequent quotations come from this passage.

sixteen years old, she had been sold several times from man to man, and so though legally bound to particular men on the basis of these transient marital arrangements, she was effectively living out a life as a sexual appendage to male businessmen who traveled the Silk Road. When she was eighteen years old, she met a Chinese man who was more gentle and kind than others. He ultimately invited this teenage Muslim woman to be his wife in a Chinese context, where she would experience more freedom. Joining him for years, she became a foreigner within Chinese contexts in the region of Gānsù, despised by some because she was not Chinese, and despised by Muslim women because she had become "the mistress of an idolater". On top of all this, she had not given birth to a child for her kind Chinese husband, who had subsequently become an opium addict. So she felt triply cursed, and was desperate to find a way toward a new kind of life. Through many years her fate gradually changed, because a woman about to give birth who was also very ill came to her home, dying after giving birth to a girl child, and so Patima took this as a gift of life, a blessing from Allah. She took the little girl and treated it as her own daughter, naming her Ginesta. When her husband's opium addiction brought them into great poverty, so that she had nothing more of her own heritage to claim except for her daughter, Patima heard about the Trio of foreign women who happened to live in the same city (presumably Sùzhōu), and so offered her services to them to teach them "Turki" or the Uygur language. Through these lessons she not only taught these wise ladies the language which they wanted to learn so that they could speak the Christian message to other Uygur speaking persons, but also joined them in reading a Uygur translation of the Gospels. Consequently, Patima began to understand something very different about the nature of Allah and the One Who was called "Aisa", the "Son of God". Through this process, she came to know that "she had a Father in heaven" and that Aisa "loved her so much that He died for her". Being invited to return to her parents' home by a man who offered to take her as a temporary wife on the road back to Kashgar after more than two decades of being away, and

carrying along her adopted daughter, Ginesta, Patima brought along with her an awareness of this "new message from the Living God", a message which the Trio hoped could guide her through the subsequent sufferings she would once more encounter under that man's authority and possibly later (if she actually ever reached Kashgar) once more under her parents' roof.

Among other converts were those Chinese persons who belonged to wealthy families steeped in traditions which bound them to ancestral rites and their attendant beliefs. One of these was a student in the provincial university named Mr. Tu Ru (assumably the family name Dù / 杜), who became seriously ill and was taken to Dr. Gāo for medical treatment when none of the Chinese medical practitioners could help him.<sup>63</sup> Having received healing from the treatments offered by the Christian doctor, and so regaining his physical health, the student listened carefully to the Christian claims, and became convinced that the message of salvation "through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ" was a liberating power which could give him a "new life" for now and eternity. Nevertheless, being the eldest son, and having already been married to a young Chinese wife, he was aware that this would not be acceptable to his elderly parents. Subsequently, when he was considering baptism, he asked to see his parents, and invited Dr. Gāo and the Trio to visit his family home. Though the stance of the elders of the family was adamantly opposed to any member of their family leaving the ancestral traditions, the young man and his wife both declared their intention nevertheless to take up Christian teachings under the guidance of the Trio. The spiritual battle lines were drawn, and led to a determined step on both sides:<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> This story appears in Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 83-88.

<sup>64</sup> Quoting from Cable and French, *Through Jade Gate and Central Asia*, 87-88.

The mother's parting threat to her son, when he left the house, was expressed in these words: "The day you join that Church you may order my coffin, for I will not live to endure such a disgrace." His answer was: "There is a way of life and a way of death. If you *must* choose the way of death, I shall mourn for you. But as for me, my path is that of Life."

Sometime later the Trio visited the town where the Dù family resided, bringing along with them graduates from the "Provincial College at Lanchow [Lánzhōu]"; among them was the son who had now become a baptized Christian. It was he who led the first Christian worship in that town during that visit, much to the amazement of many in the local crowd who knew his family. By this means Tu Ru testified to his faithfulness and his will to endure the tensions involved in the breaking of certain familial traditions in order to uphold a new kind of filial piety blessed by the God whom he worshipped.

## VI. Critical Reflections and Tentative Conclusions

As is manifest from the narratives and details documented above, the data related to Christians and their church communities in northwestern China is relatively limited. Though there are some overlaps between the claims made by the missionary Trio and local archival materials, these historical materials have still not been adequately researched in order to provide collaborative evidence and to enrich our understandings of the cultural and historical situations in which converts and churches consisting of people from different ethnic groups existed. Some details obtained from archival work by the Xīnjiāng scholar, Heiniyati, provide some initial corroboration, but there is still much that could be done in both local and overseas archives to strengthen these claims. There is also some helpful work that has been provided through the critical evaluations of foreign scholars as well, but these are still only preliminary when we discuss the character of Christian converts and their communities

in northwestern China during these two decades of the Republic of China.

Undoubtedly, because of the itinerant nature of the mission work pursued by the Trio consisting of Mildred Cable and the two French Sisters, Evangeline and Francesca, as well as by the other CIM missionaries, George Hunter and Percy Mather, they were not able to nurture Christian communities outside of the places where they resided during the more inclement period of the year — that is, in Urumqi (or Dihua / Tihwa), Suzhou, and Ganzhou. Due to the instable political situation in these areas especially during the 1930s, the potential of all these churches to become long-lasting intergenerational communities was completely compromised. Even though the congregation in Ganzhou was thriving during the 1920s, and the Christian community in Urumqi was thriving even into the 1930s, there is no contemporary evidence that we have yet uncovered which confirms that any of these communities survived until the end of World War II and into the period of the People's Republic of China. This may require more diligent field work in these towns and their local archives, but up to this point this has not been done.

Certainly the fact that missionaries from the CIM and Swedish missionaries lived in contexts where multi-ethnic interactions and conflicts were quite normal, they faced cultural, linguistic, and practical challenges as they travelled from place to place. To build communities out of these multiform groups of people may not have been their highest priority as itinerant evangelists, but it had to be a matter of concern. This was especially the case with regard to their evangelistic work among Tibetans, Mongolians, and Muslims who had many of their own sectarian and clan conflicts, all of which made the creation of a new kind of spiritual community a major challenge. Perceiving themselves as "sowers of the seeds", they presented people they met with previously unconsidered life options, some being relatively open to these possibilities. Others especially among some Muslim groups were already skeptical about their Christian



claims because of their own religious and cultural traditions about Christianity. What they had to do is become aware of those cultural and religious obstacles and find prudent ways to overcome them. But when the political situations began to spiral out of control, so that all who were in the path of raiding armies were vulnerable to their cruelties, even this form of evangelistic effort had to be stopped. The ravages of war changed the very character of the people and conditions they were in, and left very few traces of Christian communities and their social engagements within the cultural settings of the largely transformed post-war setting.

Consequently, the fact that there were some unusual converts during these periods is notable, but they were generally people who were almost completely isolated from other cultural forms of Christian institutions. Those who did benefit from the special care of the Trio of women missionaries (as seen above in the stories of Topsy, Grace, and Tu Ru), were able to take part in their temporary schools and church communities which the Trio helped to establish, and yet they were ultimately very few in number. So one can easily imagine that there were many difficulties faced by these people once they had made any kind of determined transition into a Christian form of life. Being women themselves, but from a higher echelon of society which allowed them privileges of education and learning not found among most women whom they met in northwest China during those years, the Trio highlighted the general plight of female children and mature women in all the cultures which they found within northwestern China. They boldly wrote about the gross neglect and cruel fates those women often had to suffer, and developed creative ways to address those needs. These included not only offering the message of Christian salvation, but becoming personally involved in many of those womens' lives. Their stories became reasons for much serious reflection on the nature of Christian missions among the cultures of northwestern China, and so reveal a period when Christianity accompanied modernization and alternative forms of life which were attractive to a small number of persons, among them not a few women.

Though their pioneering efforts in itinerant evangelism were particularly suited to the difficult terrain and the large stretches of arid land between human communities, such circumstances also made it very difficult for the Trio as well as their male CIM counterparts in Xīnjiāng to establish stable Christian communities. Significantly, then, there were very few local contacts who were self-confessed Christians in many of the cities and in almost all of the villages within the northwestern expanses, and so the lack of Christian pastors and other leaders was of vital concern. After travelling and visiting many places within these northwestern regions, sometimes only returning to a particular place after several years, the missionaries' work of "sowing seeds" of spiritual life was completing, leaving the seeds to grow and be harvested by others. But since there was no basis for community growth and theology education in those remote regions, there was hardly any possibility for expecting a long term spiritual impact among any of those people groups.

Obviously, the most lasting work of these itinerant missionaries from the CIM and Swedish missions was probably not their itinerant evangelism, but their work in translating dictionaries, Bible portions, and tracts, so that these materials could be passed on to those who could read or could be taught to read. What we do know from the limited materials we have regarding the Chinese Christian churches established in Gānzhōu and Sùzhōu is that they supported the development of Chinese Christian leadership, and so were essentially indigenized forms of Chinese Protestant Christianity. The fact that the Gānzhōu church lived as a communal unit was also notable as a cultural innovation thoroughly suited to the harsh conditions of that area, and helped to build strong ties among the converts and other believers. Whether this was also the case with the churches in Urumqi and Kashgar, we cannot state with certainty due to lack of descriptive information. Nevertheless, it was apparently the case that independent Russian Baptist churches were established in Xīnjiāng during this period, amounting to as many as 5000 believers during the 1920s

and 1930s, and so indicating a form of refugee Christianity created by the ideologically driven policies of the Soviet Union during those years. Beyond these relatively simple facts, however, we lack further information to verify any other details about them.

What emerges is a complex picture of a matrix of people groups which were moving in and out of the northwest region due to the immense amount of political instability during this period as well as the nomadic practices among certain people groups which were part of their normal cultural patterns of life. Though Christians in the cities could establish more long term institutional presences through hospitals, schools, and churches, those who lived among the nomadic people groups had little opportunity to set up such institutions. From this point of view, then, the contact that some of these people had with itinerant missionaries from the China Inland Mission may have proven to be very suitable to their own style of life, and possibly also became important for opening other lifestyle options they would not have considered outside of having contact with those unusual itinerant missionaries.

## ABSTRACT

This article is based primarily on published texts describing experiences during the period from 1920 to 1936 and written by three British itinerant female evangelists who were supported by the China Inland Mission (subsequently CIM): the unusual "Trio" of single women CIM missionaries who were Mildred Cable (蓋羣英, 1878-1952), Evangeline French (馮貴珠, 1869-1960) and her younger sister, Francesca French (馮貴石, 1871-1960). Along with information drawn from some other sources retrieved from Chinese archives in northwestern Chinese provinces, we discuss the varied nature of the lives of Christian converts and Christian churches in Gānsù (甘肅) and Xīnjiāng (新疆) provinces during these years of Republican China. Of particular importance for these matters in Xīnjiāng are two books the Trio wrote about two British male missionary colleagues who worked as itinerant missionaries in Xīnjiāng Province: George W. Hunter (胡進潔, 1862-1946) and Percy C. Mather (馬爾昌, 1882-1933). On the basis of these different sources, this paper focuses on identifying and interpreting the recorded experiences of these missionaries as they encountered various converts and Christian communities in these regions. It attempts to offer a critical interpretation of these sources which involve hermeneutically sensitive readings and some critical reflections about the nature of Christian missions and communities in these provinces during the Republican period.

## 撮 要

1920到1936年間，內地會「三姐妹」（三位內地會的單身女傳教士——蓋羣英、馮貴珠、馮貴石）在中國的大西北巡迴佈道，並將她們的獨特經歷刊布於世；尤為重要的是，其中涉及到兩位長期駐守新疆的英籍內地會傳教士（胡進潔和馬爾昌）和他們的工作。本文主要討論這些著述中所展現的甘肅、新疆等地基督徒及其教會的多樣生活。通過對傳教士個人記述和地方檔案史料的參照，本文旨在剖別和詮釋這些傳教士與大西北多元文化背景中的基督徒和教會相遇的經歷。對史料中所記錄的民國時期西北傳道工作和基督徒團體的生活提出詮釋性的剖析和批判性的反思，是本文所要嘗試的研究。