Missionaries with Attitude: A Women's Mission in Northwestern China

Linda Benson

Recent research on women in mission service has deepened our understanding of the overall impact of Christian missions in China. At the same time, it has drawn attention to the contributions of thousands of women who, by 1900, comprised some 60 percent of the Protestant missionary presence there. Although women at first played a relatively minor role in the leadership and decision-making processes of most mission societies, their presence was nonetheless vital to the work of all Protestant missions and today is recognized as such.

Context

Despite this recognition, however, there are still relatively few studies of women who were influential or prominent in mission service in comparison with the number of studies chronicling the lives of their male counterparts. The studies that we do have show us the value of focusing on women: their lives were, and are, an intrinsic part of the Christian missionary presence in China. As such, they help us to examine important processes such as conversion, the impact of the social gospel, and historical changes in gender relations, particularly as they relate to the place of women in the Christian church and the missionary impact on China.

For historians of modern China, the examination of Protestant missions also provides perspectives on the process of political change, particularly after China became a republic in 1912. It was my effort to understand the dramatic political shifts in China’s northwestern Xinjiang region during the republican era (1912–49) that first led me to the books of three British women who served with the China Inland Mission (CIM): Mildred Cable and the sisters Evangeline and Francesca French, all of whom spent years in northwestern China. The women’s publications proved valuable because they provided details not found in other sources on village life, trade, and contemporary political figures. Despite my interest in the women, other writing projects intervened, and it was not until several years ago that I decided the time had come to write about the women themselves, in part to understand why they had chosen to travel to the northwestern provinces of China in the 1920s, but also to understand how they had managed to survive the many dangers inherent in such a venture.

Some aspects of the women’s lives were as I had expected, but I also discovered much that I did not anticipate. As missionaries, their purpose in China was to preach the Christian Gospel. But as I soon discovered, these women not only had strong belief in God but also had strong opinions on the issues of their day. As will be seen, their beliefs occasionally placed them at odds with their male colleagues and their mission society. Indeed, as my research on the women progressed, I began to refer to them as “missionaries with attitude,” a rather irreverent way of characterizing the women, who were unwilling to have their views or their abilities dismissed. Ultimately, that strength of character proved essential when, after long years in central China, the three decided to launch a new ministry as itinerant evangelists in the Gobi area of northwestern China. In so doing, they earned themselves a unique place in the history of Christianity in China.1

Alice Mildred Cable (who preferred to be called Mildred), Evangeline French (called Eva), and Eva’s younger sister, Francesca, all lived and worked together in China from the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) through the years of the early republic. They witnessed the dramatic events of this tumultuous period, from the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 to the Chinese Revolution of 1911 and the founding in 1928 of the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek (or Jiang Jieshi). Their long years of experience in China would later make them models for aspiring missionaries, but they were also complex individuals whose lives reflected their strong support for Christian mission service in China. As such, they help us to examine important processes such as conversion, the impact of the social gospel, and historical changes in gender relations, particularly as they relate to the place of women in the Christian church and the missionary impact on China.

Early Years in China

The lives of these three women share certain commonalities, yet each one also brought unique qualities and skills to what became a lifelong partnership. Their alliance provided each one with support and friendship, without requiring them to sacrifice their individual personalities. Because Eva French was the first of the women to serve in China, this discussion begins with her and the French household.

In the French sisters’ account of their early lives,2 there is little to suggest that their parents expected or encouraged them to become missionaries. Eva French (1869–1960) and her younger sister, Francesca (1871–1960), were the daughters of a peripatetic British couple, John and Elizabeth French, who were living in Algeria when Eva was born. The family was visiting in Bruges, Belgium, at the time of Francesca’s birth, but by the time the girls reached school age, they had settled in Geneva, Switzerland. Both sisters thus received much of their education in continental Europe before the family finally moved to England in the late 1880s. After the family resettled at Portsmouth, Eva became active in church activities and felt called to serve as a missionary. This was not what the French family had expected for their daughter, but when faced with Eva’s determination, they acquiesced. After two years of training in London and Liverpool typical of that given to single women candidates of the CIM, Eva sailed for China, arriving in 1893. In addition to Bible study, the training included work with boys and girls clubs, teaching French at the YWCA, home visitation in Liverpool slums, and a period of medical training. The latter was supposed to last for six months, but Eva became ill after only a month and was excused from having to complete this part of the program.

Eva was sent to Taiyuan, the capital city of Shanxi Province, in northeastern China. Like other single women missionaries with the CIM, her earliest years in China were filled with Chinese lessons, visits to outlying villages, and other duties typically.

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assigned to young single women. She had been assigned to work in the small Shanxi town of Pingliao when the Boxer (Chinese Yihetuan) Rebellion erupted. Like so many others, Eva was forced to flee the province as roving bands of Boxers targeted missionaries and their converts. Once safely in Shanghai, she grieved for friends and colleagues who died in that summer of 1900. She left China for a period of home leave to rest and recover, but a year later she chose to return to work in Shanxi.

The year of her return, 1901, was also the year Alice Mildred Cable (1878–1952) first arrived in China. Mildred’s background and education were decidedly British in comparison with the bilingual French sisters, but like them she came from a family that enjoyed a comfortable life provided by her businessman father in the southern town of Guildford. Like the Frenches, her parents did not envision their daughter as a missionary, but they too ultimately accepted Mildred’s decision. She had nearly completed a university degree when she left for China, traveling via the United States. The Boxer Rebellion had just ended, and newly arrived mission volunteers found themselves assigned to stations with a minimum of language training. Mildred was sent to join Eva French, who was working alone at Huozhou, a town in central Shanxi Province. The two women quickly became devoted friends and colleagues. When Eva’s mother died in 1908, the two traveled to England together on furlough. Francesca, who had served as nurse and companion to their mother while Eva was in China, was now free to join them as a missionary, a goal she had long cherished. Thus was formed what became known as the Trio.

They were at the forefront of advocating full inclusion of women in all aspects of Christian religious practice.

In Huozhou, Shanxi Province

At Huozhou the lives of the three women followed a relatively conventional pattern. They taught in the Huozhou girls’ school and, as time permitted, visited homes in nearby villages in rotation. Mildred and Francesca also both worked in the mission dispensary, which was open to all local residents. A less conventional aspect of the mission station was the “opium refuge,” where addicts lived while undergoing a cure. The three women held unequivocally negative views on the British role in the spread of opium, and the refuge was one way in which they, as British subjects, could counter at least some of the impact of the opium trade.

During their years at Huozhou, the Christian congregation expanded, as did the size of the church building; enrollments in the school grew, and the opium refuge continued to attract new patients. By the time of World War I, the church at Huozhou had also made great progress toward the oft-stated goal of “nativization.” Two Chinese pastors served the church, Chinese Christian women taught in the school, and all contributed to outreach programs for neighboring villages.

In a sense, the women’s success contributed to their decision to leave Huozhou. After twenty years, they believed that the mission station should be placed in Chinese hands, and that belief was certainly one factor in their decision. But other forces were also at work. By 1921 they had become acutely aware of what they considered the needs of the great “untouched” areas of China, especially the Muslim northwest. They had heard reports from colleagues at mission conferences about people there who had yet to hear the Christian Gospel, and they also knew that few volunteers had come forward to take up this challenge. They came to believe that they had received a new call, to a new part of China, and as experienced senior missionaries they felt ready to meet the challenge.

Developments outside the mission sphere also contributed to the women’s sense that it was time for a change. Immediately following World War I, British women had increased their call for female equality. By the time Mildred, Eva, and Francesca arrived back in England for home leave after the war, British women not only had gained the right to vote but also had elected the first woman to serve in the British Parliament. Such developments signaled a new era for women, and mission societies soon heard calls for similar changes from their women members. Cable and the French sisters added their voices to the chorus. Not only did they strongly support a female presence on mission governing boards, but they also were at the forefront of advocating the full inclusion of women in all aspects of Christian religious practice. Their views on the proper role of women in the church were not initially shared by the majority of their fellow missionaries, but over the course of their lifetimes the women saw some of the changes they so strongly advocated gain acceptance by mainstream Protestant groups.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Trio’s decision to begin a new venture as itinerant missionaries ranging across the modern-day Silk Road provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, and Xinjiang drew both criticism and praise. Western China was relatively unknown at the time, and the women’s desire to leave the safety of their Shanxi mission station for the uncertainty of life in the west must have caused great concern to the CIM’s leaders, not all of whom considered such a mission suitable for women. Although archival materials are silent on whether disagreements with male colleagues over women’s place in mission service played a part in their decision to leave Huozhou, the possibility cannot be dismissed. The delay in receiving permission to begin their new ministry (a year elapsed before their request was approved) suggests that at least some members of the CIM leadership weighed the question with great care.

Ultimately, however, the women began their Gobi ministry with the blessing of the CIM. A period of adventure, danger, frustration, and exhilarating experiences began, and it lasted until the women finally left China in 1936. By then, they were well known as seasoned Silk Road travelers, knowledgeable authors and scholars, and, above all, dedicated missionaries with the CIM.

West to Suzhou (Jiuquan), Gansu Province

Initially, the women followed the great trading routes of northern China as they made their way to the northwestern city of Xian and then on to Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province. From Lanzhou, they continued west to the town of Ganzhou, where a small church had been established by Dr. Gao, a medical missionary. They remained at Ganzhou initially, but in 1924 they moved further west to Suzhou (now Jiuquan), where they rented premises for a church and housing for themselves. This town remained their base throughout their stay in the northwest, although their itinerations kept them away for long periods. From Suzhou they traveled to small villages and attended fairs, where
they would set up their tent and sell or give away copies of the Gospels. Whenever weather permitted, they traveled extensively in Gansu Province and gradually extended their range to include Tibetan villages in what is now Qinghai Province, Mongol encampments in Gansu and Inner Mongolia, and, eventually, small Muslim towns in eastern and central Xinjiang.

The Trio believed that the Christian message would be welcome among Muslim women because it offered spiritual strength that could liberate them from what the missionaries saw as the oppression of patriarchal Muslim society. Some of the women they met were Chinese Muslims, or Hui, who spoke Chinese and could thus speak directly with the missionaries. Despite their common language, however, few converts from among the Hui are mentioned in their writings. But the northwest was (and is) also home to other Muslim populations, the largest being the Uighurs and the Kazakhs. For work among these people, the women studied Uighur (then called Turki), hiring tutors when they were at their Suzhou base and when they visited Urumchi, the capital of the Xinjiang region. Rather than hiring tutors when they were at their Suzhou base and when they visited Urumchi, the capital of the Xinjiang region. Rather than viewing the need to master yet another language as an obstacle, they willingly set to work learning what they needed to know for their new ministry.

Despite the women’s enthusiasm for the work that lay ahead, they received sharp criticism from unnamed colleagues not long after they had settled at Suzhou. Word had reached the outside world that Eva French had given Communion to the not long after they had settled at Suzhou. Word had reached the outside world that Eva French had given Communion to the not long after they had settled at Suzhou. Word had reached the outside world that Eva French had given Communion to the women. The following year at Easter, Mildred led the Communion service. Clearly the women had decided to act on their convictions that women were equal to men both in mission service and in Christian religious practice.

More generous colleagues, mindful of the women’s isolation and the importance of celebrating Communion at Christmas and Easter, focused instead on the women’s achievements. After all, not only had they volunteered for work few men were willing to undertake, but they also had placed themselves in a region where they were beyond the protection of their government’s consular services, should they have needed them. In fact, not even the possibility of assistance from the Chinese central government existed in Gansu, where local warlords wielded absolute power. Their safety in what became an increasingly unsettled region ultimately depended on the goodwill of the local population. Without it, the women could never have traveled as many miles and for such a long period as they did. As their books and articles make clear, their welcome was sometimes assured by their medical skills, sometimes through their friendships with local women. Although local Muslim leaders occasionally opposed their message and caused them to move on to the next town, their difficulties had more to do with the harsh conditions of the Gobi than with animosity from the local Muslim population.

Their ability to travel in western China is even more remarkable when compared with that of other Europeans who ventured into the region at approximately the same time. The 1920s saw a number of major Gobi expeditions backed by the governments of England, the United States, Sweden, and Germany. As recounted in Peter Hopkirk’s book Foreign Devils on the Silk Road, each sought to make archaeological discoveries that would bring fame and renown to its scholars and museum collections. Men like Aurel Stein, Sven Hedin, and Albert von Le Coq traveled the area, often with armed guards and caravan loads of provisions.

Eva, Francesca, and Mildred provide an interesting contrast, as they bumped along the tracks of the old Silk Road in their carts, with copies of religious literature and their cart driver. On some of their travels, a few Chinese Christian colleagues joined them, but they remained a small, vulnerable party. Like pioneering figures in other settings, the women accepted the risks and embraced the opportunities that Gobi travel offered them.

The travels of these women provided a strong argument for sending women, as well as men, to work in the northwest of China. As they would make clear in their books and articles, no male missionary, however sincere or well regarded by the local people, could interact with Muslim women as they did. Invitations to women’s quarters allowed the three British women to meet local women in their homes and to visit the same women regularly throughout their time in the northwest. In short, women were vital to the success of any Christian effort in the Muslim regions.

**Literary, Scholarly, and Social Success**

Over their years in western China, the Trio came to know the peoples and trade routes well. To share their knowledge of the region and to publicize the need for more volunteers to minister to such a vast area, the women began to write the books that today remain an important part of the Cable and French legacy. On periodic home leaves they in effect began a second ministry through their writing and publishing: These books are also what first brought the three women to the attention of the general public. The Cable and French books were written with grace, wit, and authority, but it was the stories of travel in exotic lands and of the sacrifices this life entailed that brought them growing numbers of admirers and supporters. Like other missionaries on home leave in England, the women often spoke publicly, but because of their books and the strong public interest in China at the time, the women were in almost constant demand as speakers during periods of home leave. They drew enormous audiences whenever they spoke. In fact, their popularity was such that newspaper reporters eagerly interviewed them when they arrived in town, and local papers as well as mission publications published their schedule of speaking engagements well in advance.

The travels of these three women also brought them another form of fame that most missionaries neither aspired to nor had the energy or ability to pursue. They won recognition for their scholarly writing and archaeological discoveries from England’s learned circles; they also received awards from two prestigious royal societies for their knowledge of the Gobi and its peoples. Mildred Cable addressed the membership of several such societies during her furloughs, and articles under her name alone appeared in scholarly journals, establishing her as an authoritative contributor to central Asian studies. By example, they showed countless women—from London to Beijing—that hard work, difficult travel, and scholarly endeavors were not the sole province of men.

Another aspect of the women’s lives not readily apparent...
from their books or other sources is the richness of their extensive social networks. They counted among their friends and correspondents members of leading Mongolian families and high-ranking Chinese officials. At academic gatherings in England, they shared the podium with Sir Denison Ross, an eminent scholar of central Asia, and Sir Francis Younghusband, the British colonel whose 1904 occupation of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, drew worldwide attention and controversy. During World War II the three received an invitation for tea at Buckingham Palace with the queen, who was among their admirers and a supporter of several societies with which the women were associated. In addition to moving in these exalted circles, the women knew countless people of more humble backgrounds who also belonged to their informal network of friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and admirers. As these connections show, the women did not hide from life or from controversy but embraced every opportunity to learn and to extend themselves intellectually and socially.

As the above comments suggest, the women’s own writings and their public personae have made them very accessible figures. Nonetheless, unanswered questions remain. For example, despite the books detailing their years in China’s northwest, it is still unclear how many Muslims, male or female, became converts as a result of their efforts. The three women apparently did not send in reports to the CIM headquarters in Shanghai, nor did they provide numbers in their books or other writings. Instead, they asserted that their goal was to follow the original vision of James Hudson Taylor, the founder of the CIM. He had called upon his membership to rely on God and to spread the Gospel as widely as possible. The women fully embraced this view and believed that their role was to “scatter the seed” of the Christian message and to leave the final matter of conversion to the Lord. After all, they had limited resources and only a small congregation at Ganzhou to support their efforts. While we know that they made some converts among the Han Chinese, there are few specific references to Muslim converts, so the final tally of such converts remains unknown.

Another example of missing information stems from the women’s decision not to name specific individuals in their books. For instance, neither close colleagues and supporters nor critics of their personal views on women’s roles in mission service are identified. Thus, the origin of the letter taking them to task for their generation of missionaries. These gifts, as Mildred called upon his membership to rely on God and to spread the Gospel as widely as possible. The women fully embraced this view and believed that their role was to “scatter the seed” of the Christian message and to leave the final matter of conversion to the Lord. After all, they had limited resources and only a small congregation at Ganzhou to support their efforts. While we know that they made some converts among the Han Chinese, there are few specific references to Muslim converts, so the final tally of such converts remains unknown.

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By the time the Trio left the northwest of China—and China itself—for the last time in 1936, a brief window of opportunity was closing. The Japanese invasion of China in the summer of 1937 sharply curtailed mission activity. Although the Japanese did not advance into Xinjiang, the provincial warlord Sheng Shicai ordered all missionaries expelled in 1938. It was decades before missionaries were again allowed into Gansu and Xinjiang.

Retirement

Eva, Francesca, and Mildred began yet another phase of their lives when they returned to England and settled in Dorset. They remained actively engaged in Christian organizations and maintained a regular speaking schedule until travel became perilous during World War II. They also spent time with their adopted daughter, Eileen Guy, who had been a child beggar in the streets of Suzhou. Her deafness and the neglect she suffered at the hands of her stepmother had contributed to her learning disabilities, and the women arranged to adopt her while still living in Suzhou. In England they engaged a tutor for her, and as a result, she learned to read and write. Eva took primary responsibility for her care when Francesca and Mildred were working or traveling.

When World War II finally ended, the women accepted invitations to travel abroad. They visited Australia, New Zealand, India, and later Latin America. Admiring crowds welcomed them wherever they appeared. It was after their last international sojourn, to Latin America, that Mildred Cable’s health declined. She died in 1952, breaking what the women saw as the “threefold cord” that had bound their lives together. The French sisters each passed away in 1960 within months of each other.

Of all the labels by which the Trio might be known—authors, scholars, Silk Road travelers—they themselves no doubt would wish to be remembered first and foremost as pioneering missionaries who brought the Christian message not just to the people of China but especially to China’s Muslims. Throughout their time in China, they remained loyal, if not always submissive, members of one of the oldest mission societies in China, and there is no question that they deeply admired the vision of James Hudson Taylor. At the same time, they also embraced and supported the work of other Christian organizations as evinced by their activities after leaving China. Mildred became a vice president of the British and Foreign Bible Society, a position which carried no salary but which was, in effect, a full time job; Eva was named a vice president of the Zenana and Bible Medical Mission (serving women in India); and Francesca served as president of the Girl Crusaders Union and was also named an honorary life governor of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1945. The women’s renown also reached beyond mission circles. Their books on the Gobi Desert and western China became best sellers in their day and remain an important contribution to the history of the region.

The accomplishments of the Trio set them apart from other women in mission service who did not have the same opportunities for education and travel that these three enjoyed as a result of their affluent backgrounds. Their intellectual curiosity, their remarkable writing ability, and their careers as authors and public speakers also served to distinguish them from others in their generation of missionaries. These gifts, as Mildred called them, also allowed the three to speak out for changes in mission service for women. Through the example of their own lives and careers, they came to symbolize the full development of women’s potential in the work of spreading Christianity in China.

Notes

1. The following brief introduction to the women is drawn from a book manuscript currently in preparation and tentatively entitled “Across China’s Gobi (White Plains, N.Y.: EastBridge, forthcoming).”
5. See especially Mildred Cable and Francesca French, Ambassadors for Christ (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), and also references in Cable and French, Through Jade Gate and Central Asia (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927).
6. Of their twenty-plus books, Mildred Cable’s Gobi Desert, which first
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Selected Bibliography

Works by Mildred Cable

Works by Mildred Cable and Francesca French

Work by Mildred Cable, Evangeline French, and Francesca French

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