China, in Dim Light

Pierre Fuller

University of California, Irvine

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China, in Dim Light

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By Pierre Fuller


On a train moving across north China last year, a girl, blond hair reaching down to her waist, maybe 15, darted past my bottom perch in the hard sleeper. As much as her hair, it was the colorful ankle-length dress she wore that caught my eye, the kind I’d spotted on girls in places like rural Utah and Nevada. I could have sworn I’d seen an apparition, but settled anyway back into my book.

Within moments a Chinese teenager dropped onto my bunk, holding, very skeptically, a pamphlet, and before long I realized he wanted me, the other white presence on the train, to decipher some material he’d been handed by “that” foreign family at the end of the car. Only later, as I detrained onto the platform somewhere in north Henan or Hebei province, did I spot this tall white couple and their troop of three or four kids, who all seemed to spring more from the pages of early 20th century Americana than a 21st century Walmart. Mission activity, if not alive and well in 2009, was well in the open, at least on this part of the north China plain.

This new wave of missionaries is of course one of many going far back, and so is the genre of missionary literature introducing home audiences to their distant mission fields. Over the course of my research on China over the years I’d grown weary of this genre’s formulaic offerings, but, with half a century since the last cluster of such publications and in the meantime good strides in scholarship on the country, I thought I’d at least give a read to Bo Caldwell’s City of Tranquil Light, a novel in the form of a missionary memoir put out by a mainstream outfit — Henry Holt and Company, now a division of MacMillan — that has published the likes of Hermann Hesse and Norman Mailer.

Caldwell prefaces her story by explaining that she’d been intrigued by the idea that her grandfather, Will, a Mennonite missionary in early twentieth century north China, returned from “decades of war, famine, illness, personal danger, and great hostility” toward his work to settle into the mundane life of the American suburb, strolling in “rose gardens and play[ing] with [his] grandchildren” without the slightest sign of his previous existence in the thick of China’s tumultuous 1900s. “While there were certainly [missionaries] who exploited the people they had come to serve,” she writes, “there were also many who poured out their lives for strangers and for their faith. And I wanted to tell their story.”
Caldwell’s prefatory remarks put me in mind of a drive I made a few years back from my graduate studies in Orange County to a compound of pretty bungalows set aside for veterans of foreign missions down the street from the Huntington Library in Pasadena. There, my grandmother’s college roommate, a still-animate 101-year-old woman who had gone off to China in the early 1930s, married and taken to the mission field, regaled me with reminiscences next to her own idyllic garden plot not far from where Caldwell’s grandfather had settled in Claremont, California, at a “a home for retired missionaries.” Could the place I’d gone to, I wondered, have been the real-life model for the fictional locale evoked in City of Tranquil Light?

This parallel aside, I also took up Caldwell’s narrative for a different reason: I recently spent an extended period in Asia researching charity networks in rural north China, and, quite specifically, looking at how they related to relief of the great drought famine that struck five provinces in the North in 1920-21. When I noticed that chapter six of City of Tranquil Light is entitled “Famine, 1918-1922,” naturally, I zeroed in on it.

In those years, far from their respective family farms in Oklahoma and South Dakota, Will and his wife, Katherine, the characters based on Caldwell’s grandparents, were posted in Kuang P’ing Ch’eng (Wade Giles Romanization is used throughout the book), a city on the north China plain “three days to the north of Ch’eng An Fu by cart.” I took this to be somewhere north of the Cheng’an County seat, which lies in the deep south of today’s Hebei Province, although Caldwell gives little in the way of geographic guidance. But this is a “novel,” one in the voice of a protagonist based on Caldwell’s grandfather and informed by his memoirs, and threaded with the purported diary entries of his wife. I had to suppress the student in me.

“The threat of overwork was a concern for anyone in the mission field in China,” the sixth chapter starts off, “for the simple reason that there was always so much need.” Katherine, who has not been home to the States for furlough in 12 years, is soon informed that she has been rendered barren by malaria and the general “sickness or fatigue” from which she often collapsed, caring for patients with simple but horrific ailments “regardless of the toll it took on her health.” With an expressed love for the place and its people (and an increased alienation from their Midwest American roots) the couple presses on, acquiring the compound of a pottery workshop in town at a bargain price — after a murder onsite, and with the skeleton remaining in plain view, “no Chinese would think of buying it” in fear of “evil spirits” — which they convert into a worship space and clinic “soon seeing sixty patients a day” (pp. 151-60).

The Yellow River floods of 1919 then strike, followed by China’s worst drought in 40 years, and the couple quickly shelter “nearly two hundred people,” “ladling out millet gruel” each morning from “five large kettles” to a “line of people that seemed endless,” paying visits to a local market stand “each day” to “buy every child offered for sale,” converting the clinic into an orphanage and the meeting hall into a clinic, traveling to “outlying towns and villages to provide medical care and to distribute grain sent by the American Red Cross.” “It is a marvel,” a local man tells them amid the famine, “for a foreign-born to endure our pain” (pp. 163-7)

What have the locals been up to? They’re busy binding their children to “trees and [leaving] them there” to die, and discarding infant corpses for the dogs to fight over. “Widows” whom the missionaries “had clothed and fed” cursed the American couple “to [their] face, claiming [the foreigners] had killed their husbands then eaten them.” “Boys” taken in by the mission “began to lie and steal.” “More than one hundred bandits had burned every house and shot or stabbed anyone who tried to escape” from a nearby village. The son of a local bandit, having once “burned parents alive in front of their children,” slashes open the faces of two innocent boys, after which a mob seized the man, “kicked every part of his body,” and hauled him to the local magistrate. Before long, “slits were cut into [the bandit’s] body and lighted candles were inserted into his skin,” and he was beheaded for display on the city wall (pp. 162-73).

The problem here is not Caldwell’s depiction of pure misery — banditry, suicide, and the selling of children were common when twenty million Chinese were struggling to carry on — but that she gives no indication that local Chinese had it in them to do anything but feud and prey upon themselves throughout the crisis. Meanwhile, the area’s market in kindness was cornered by none other than the
characters who are based on her own kin, figures who take on a spectacular, Christ-like form in the process. How else does one interpret a scene in the thick of the famine in which Will appeals to the magistrate for leniency on behalf of a bandit. “While I knew that Hsiao Lao was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people and for much suffering,” Will relates, “I grieved for him, for I had come to love him.” To this, the Chinese official responds: “I know of your love of humanity. Unlike you, I believe he deserves to endure great pain.”

The message is Manichean in its simplicity: Forgiveness is foreign. Sadism is as Chinese as stir-fry.

In Caldwell’s construction, the local magistrate appears twice amid an epic humanitarian crisis, and both times only as the heartless provider of unspeakable punishment. (Curiously, my research notes concerning this very month of December 1920 tell me that, about the time Chinese candles were employed in this bandit’s demise, headlines announced that on December 9th, up the Hudson from New York City at Sing Sing prison, five men strapped to “Old Sparky” were shot through and fried with electricity within 52 minutes of each other.)

But, according to news reports in the fall of 1920 and also the 1931 county gazetteer, authorities in Cheng’an County, which presumably included this official, had by this time brought in 360,000 kilos of grain for subsidized discount sale to the county’s population of 53,000 (a traditional measure in China to rein in food prices) and were in the process of setting up soup kitchens, although it is unclear if they ever materialized (Shuntian shibao, Oct 13, 1920; Dagong bao, December 9, 1920). One county resident, who had taken on a Buddhist name, was credited in his gazetteer biography with the foresight to encourage residents in the 1910s to plant trees throughout the county, which ended up providing the fruit and fuel for a reported 10,000 locals to pull through the 1920-21 famine. Then elsewhere across the north China plain both state and nonofficial Chinese relief efforts were in fact feeding millions of people, as far as I can tell. Still, in Caldwell’s window onto the year, succor to the starving comes only from the mission gates, and, so the chapter ends, by “March of 1922” (which was actually 1921, the dates on her famine narrative are all off by a year), rains finally come and the couple “began distributing seed grain sent by the Red Cross” and soon the once-dead “landscape was transformed” (pp. 173-86).

At this point I wondered what this piece of literature I was holding even was. Two options came to mind: I was reading a novel strongly informed by an actual memoir and actual letters. Or fiction, strictly-defined, only inspired by a memoir. What’s the difference?

If the first, if Caldwell has faithfully followed her grandfather’s memoir, she has done so with too much faith in the witness provided by missionaries in the field; the north China plain had in fact a thinner mission presence than anywhere else in the country, aside from the far west. With mission members averaging only 1 in 10,000 of the rural south Zhili population, there was considerable breathing room for grain and clothing handouts or soup kitchen activity by local or national Chinese groups to operate well beyond earshot of the scattered mission compounds.

More, without conditioning her work — for a suburban book-club or general American audience with little to no knowledge of rural 1920s Chinese society beyond, perhaps, Pearl Buck’s Good Earth — that is, without prefacing it at least as a work set through the myopic, self-aggrandizing eyes of an era shaped by patronizing Western views of those living in other parts of the world, Caldwell’s offering incorporates no development in our perception or our understanding of other peoples. She hands us a hundred-year-old pair of spectacles on rural Chinese society and neglects to mention that her granddad’s prescription might have been a bit off. Off by a mile or so.

Then, if this is in fact no indirect memoir, if it’s pure fiction, a figment of Caldwell’s imagination of rural Chinese society in the early part of the twentieth century, the result is even more disturbing. Caldwell is a good and accessible writer with a growing readership after her first bestseller, The Distant Land of My Father, a novel set in 1930s Shanghai that was inspired by a similar family connection to China and has been praised in many venues, including at China Beat. And yet, in spite of this growing reach, Caldwell doesn’t appear to have bothered to learn about the historical events she lays out to her readers. “By the fall of 1921 we had had no rain,” she writes of the famine, “and millions of people across northern China had died from starvation.” Millions? In the 1870s, yes. In
1928-30, yes. But by all accounts, 500,000 died in 1920-21 out of over twenty million of north China's destitute, a figure confirmed by a well-circulated 1922 report available in many university libraries. Relief in 1920-21 was in fact a relative success — by the Chinese state and by Chinese society as much as by the international community.

But perhaps pointing this out — that the author inflates a death toll by several million — is academic, even tedious, and beside the point. Perhaps numbers don't matter at all when a timeless China and its multitudes are the subject. Our heroes, we learn from the back cover of City of Tranquil Light (in wording that also appears, along with early glowing reviews, at the publisher's website), "soon find themselves witnesses to the crumbling of a more than two-thousand-year old dynasty that plunges the country into decades of civil war." Two thousand years? The fact that China’s last dynasty, the Qing, was established in 1644 and not around the birth of Jesus may not exactly be street knowledge, but there is, in our day, Wikipedia, for such rather basic facts, which raises the question of whether Henry Holt has a fact-checking department at all. Or whether bothering with the chore of corroboration even crosses the mind of authors and editors serving up “China” to the Oprah book clubs of the world.

Elsewhere on the cover we learn that City of Tranquil Light is a "portrait of a couple in love with each other, their work, and their adopted country.” Too bad this portrait, by a doting grandchild, is made at the expense of all Chinese around them. And too bad this will be lost on readers out there, who knows how many.

Pierre Fuller is completing a dissertation in Chinese charity networks and famine relief in the History Department at the University of California, Irvine. He recently published a commentary in the International Herald Tribune on China’s rich history of philanthropy.

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