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ICWA LETTERS

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Matters of the Heart... and the Nation

SHIMENKAN TOWNSHIP, Guizhou, China

JUNE 1999

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
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Dear Peter,

On Sunday morning, April 25, more than 10,000 adherents of *Falun Gong* [Buddhist Law] slipped unassumingly past all of the early-warning systems that protected an already-tense Tiananmen Square and quietly surrounded Zhongnanhai, China's White House, where the country's leaders live and work.¹ This, the largest public demonstration since 1989, was not of shouting students, either. Most of those who sat silently in protest around the government headquarters were middle-aged and elderly men and women — retired factory workers, bespectacled professors, some even Communist Party members.

Since that Spring day, when the thunder of silent protest echoed through the halls of Zhongnanhai, the government has decided to crack down on Falun Gong. And it has with a fury. The political campaign has reached stunning proportions. During the ten-day period after Falun Gong was outlawed on July 22, China Central Television's 30-minute evening news program aired practically nothing but anti-Falun Gong rhetoric in which academics, former followers and ordinary citizens spoke about how the cult cheats its followers, separates families, damages health and hurts social stability. The government operation is a study in full-court-press demonization.

In the first seven days after the campaign began, Chinese authorities rounded up at least 5,000 Falun Gong members, ransacking homes and confiscating printed material. Another 1,200 government officials have been detained and are being required to study Communist Party documents and to renounce any allegiance to the movement, according to the *New York Times*.²

But behind the scathing, high-priced and wide-ranging campaign, there looms a simple but important question: Why in heaven would millions of people, reportedly more in number than the Communist Party membership itself, flock to a belief system that teaches self-cultivation, group exercise and

¹ Falun Gong, a quasi-religious movement that combines a range of breathing, healing and meditation techniques, was established in 1992. Li Hongzhi, its leader, a 48-year-old former grain official from northeast China, claims he has a higher authority than Buddha, Mohammed and Jesus. Only he knows the "way," he says. Li is now based in New York. Falun Gong claims 100 million followers.

² *New York Times*, 26 July 1999, 1.

the end of the world? The answer to that question has a lot to do with the promises of the communist revolution, 50 years old this October. According to the guy who sat next to me at the barbershop yesterday, it's all about a crisis of faith [*xinyang weiji*].

* * * * *

The rhetoric of the revolution promised to deliver more than just a new political order; it preached an orthodoxy that would emancipate and transform the way people believed and behaved. Mao Zedong, who had particular scorn for Confucius and religious "superstition," propagated a new faith that directly confronted the past.

During a month-long 1927 trip to Hunan Province's countryside, for example, during which he inspected a nascent peasant movement, Mao Zedong poked fun at the farmers' traditional beliefs:

"The gods and goddesses are indeed pitiful; worshipped for hundreds of years, they have not knocked down for you a single local bully or a single one of the bad gentry! Now you want to have your rent reduced. I would like to ask: How will you go about it? Believe in the gods, or believe in the peasant association?"³

The "reactionary cultures" of tradition and religion, Mao argued, had to be thoroughly swept away if a new order was to be established capable of cultivating the "new man" communist ideology so vigorously promoted.

Post-1949 history shows what happened to Mao's communist dream. Revolution and waves of anti-superstition campaign gutted traditional religious and philosophical systems; but in the pursuit of the perfect society — itself, mind you, a very traditional theme — the ideal went awry. The people's revolution became a Mao-centered personality cult, complete with the high-pitched fervor of even the most extreme religions.

Mao may have made a first-class revolutionary, but he was a deity of the poorest order. The Cultural Revolution showed what happens when rulers play god.

Heights of exuberance followed by the depths of crushing disillusionment left many people burned so badly they could no longer put their faith in anything or anyone. One woman, who was a student during the 1960's and a onetime loyal follower of Mao, described her heart to me as a rock — unable to feel anything.

With the erosion of communism as a belief system,

Chinese pragmatism — despite the window dressing of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought — revived under Deng Xiaoping. "Black cat or white cat, a good cat is one that catches mice," Deng preached as he introduced reform and opening. Since the 1980's, economic growth, not revolutionary ideology, has become the people's hope and the ticket to the Communist Party's legitimacy. Most Chinese began to sing from a new page in their hymnbooks: "To Get Rich is Glorious."

While Deng-led reforms resulted in remarkable economic advances for hundreds of millions of people, another reality has become abundantly clear: wealth alone cannot fulfill the human heart, neither can it substitute for the core values of a nation.

With tradition destroyed (or at least suppressed), communism as a value system discredited and the pursuit of wealth incomplete, a vacuum of belief has become pervasive. Frenetic social change and dislocation have exacerbated it. One Guizhou Province government official recently described the present situation to me in broken English as "a lost heart."

Matters of the soul are never easy to quantify and their interplay with social, economic and political forces is both subtle and complex.⁴ But there are links. Spiritual search as well as a self-described moral crisis provide the clearest evidence of China's dilemma.

The closer one lives to the country's grass-roots realities and the more intently one listens to people on the streets and in the mountains as they speak, the more apparent the predicament becomes. Dishonesty, disregard for the law, abuse of power, irrelevance of means to achieve desired ends, and a general frailty of community relations, have reached troubling proportions, locals tell me. Where I live, these problems have become the norm, not the exception. Their most extreme forms are expressed in prostitution (both supply and demand), gambling and every imaginable form of corruption.

And it is severe. A township-government official in charge of disaster relief requests that impoverished villagers apply for funds to repair their flood-damaged bridge. He'll take care of it, he assures them — they never see the money, or the repairs. High-school students cheat on the nationwide college-entrance exam by receiving test answers over their personal beepers. Their accomplices? Their teachers, test in hand, phones them the answers. Monitors look the other way. An expressway collapses weeks after completion because of the skimming of funds throughout the construction process. County-government

³ Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Volume II* (New York: Columbia University, 1960), 213.

⁴ I am uncomfortably aware of the pitfalls of making generalizations about belief in a culture so different from my own. Even so, issues of faith as a fundamental contributing factor to both the health and ills of a society have come up so often during my almost two years of living in Guizhou that I decided to focus an ICWA report exclusively on this topic. In so doing, I attempt to make statements that reflect the situation as conveyed to me by Chinese themselves.

Elaborate funeral processions with firecrackers, smoke bombs, paper money — even gifts, blankets and food for the next life — illustrate the revival of supernatural belief in China.



officials gather frequently in a reserved karaoke hall — their club — to “play” with junior-high-aged girls. The list goes on ... and on.

Certainly, many of the problems described are inherent to any country in the midst of historic social and economic transition. Some even blame China’s problems on western influence. But as central as any of the causes given for today’s moral muddle is the issue of belief. An epidemic-sized number of people are caught suspended somewhere in the vacuous space between collapsed tradition, discredited communist ideology and the illusive pursuit of wealth.

This crisis of faith is creating very soft ground — sink-holes, they call them in the state of Florida — below ongoing efforts to construct the People’s Republic of China.

SEARCH

That is why it has been so fascinating during my two-year ICWA fellowship, living among the people of Guizhou Province, to observe a widespread quest for belief — efforts to find a meaningful worldview, peace, satisfying human relationships, moral guidance and a basis for social justice. In fact, people tell me, widespread search verifies that there is a need.

In both urban and rural areas, there has been widespread revival of all forms of orthodox religion believed in prior to the communist revolution of 1949. A recent *China Daily* article stated that China’s five major religions [Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism] are thriving. For example, 30,000 mosques dot China’s northwest; 200,000 monks and nuns serve 13,000

Buddhist temples; and 12,000 churches (75 percent of which have been built since the Cultural Revolution) provide a home for followers of Christ.⁵ And those figures report only government-sanctioned activities.

Outside the pales of orthodoxy — the place where most people live — there is a lot of nominal groping. A few weeks ago, on the train between Guiyang and our home in Duyun, a chic, 20-something-year-old woman sat across from me. A jade Buddha hung from her neck.

“Do you believe in Buddha?” I asked.

“I guess so.”

“What do you mean?”

“My friends and I think this brings us good luck.”

“All her friends go to the temple and burn incense when they need something or have a problem,” her boyfriend said, jumping into the conversation, “but they don’t know who Buddha is. They couldn’t pass a test on even the basics of Buddhism.”

“And you? What do you believe in?”

“I am not sure. But *none* of my friends believe in *nothing*. We all believe that there is *something* out there. Hey, by the way, have you ever heard of UFO’s ...?”

In the countryside, the revival of religion came earlier than in China’s urban areas. Though there are followers of orthodox faiths, most rural residents I have spoken

⁵ *China Daily*, 7 June 1999, 4.



Small shrines, like this one, dot China's rural areas. Inside the tiny altars sit family gods Tu yeye and Tu nainai [literally: local grandfather and grandmother], assigned to look after the family and crops. During various festivals these shrines are worshipped.

with believe in folk religion: "a belief in a host of benevolent and baleful gods and spirits, and the prevalence of numerous practices such as the makings of offerings to win their aid or the observance of taboos to escape their wrath."⁶ During travels across Guizhou's countryside, I have encountered widespread faith in astrology, dream interpretation, witchcraft, palmistry, fortune telling and other forms of charms and magic, most of which are tied to ancestor worship.⁷

I recently met an elderly woman in Guizhou's Zunyi District whose two grown sons, now in their late 40s, were not able to marry because of a horrible skin condition. The culprit? They believe improper burial of their ances-

tors has left their sons cursed. No cures have worked.

In another Guizhou village, family problems led to a woman's mental illness. The witchdoctor consulted told the family that if they erected a shrine and installed a Buddha she would recover. The family took up a village-wide collection and built the altar. That was ten years ago; the woman is still ill.

In yet another rural area, "demon fire," [*gui huo*] the locals described to me was seen hovering around a village home several nights before the couple that lived there was tragically killed by a downed electrical wire.

Though relatively relaxed government policy (since the Mao era) has created space for religion's revival, continued marginalization of religion combined with rapid social change and spiritual hunger has created fertile ground for the emergence of cults.

Falun Gong is the best example of a quasi-religious movement that has swept the nation. And it is not the only movement out there that fits no religious category but its own.

THE STONE THRESHOLD

The question of belief is also part of the reason two friends and I traveled to a remote township, known as The Stone Threshold [*Shimenkan*], accessible only by Jeep, in Guizhou's northwesternmost corner.⁸ At an elevation of over 6,000 feet, the mountain region that surrounds Shimenkan, Wumeng Shan, is one of the most rugged

and poor areas in Guizhou Province.

The most numerous ethnic group in the region is the Big Flowery Miao [*Da Hua Miao*], one of a dozen or so Miao subgroupings. The Miao have long been a despised people. In fact, several Chinese have told me of a western scholar who has suggested that the two most oppressed peoples in the world have been the Jews and the Miao. Even today, prejudiced Chinese use the word "Miao" the way racists in the United States use the term "nigger."

Of all the Miao subgroups, the Big Flowery Miao have been the most oppressed. Just over 100 years ago, for ex-

⁶ de Bary, 285.

⁷ The revival of ancestor worship in China's countryside, because it is so closely tied to clan relations, has interesting implications for rural politics. Clan influence in some areas has also been galvanized as a response to extreme levels of local corruption.

⁸ My travel companions were Anne Thurston, China specialist and author, and Jason Kindopp, George Washington University Ph.D. candidate.



Flowerly Miao. He wore the same clothes as the Miao, refused to ride on horses or on sedan chairs as other privileged people did, did not carry weapons, used the Miao language to communicate, ate potatoes and wheat porridge with the common folk and initially lived in a thatched-roof hut like everyone else.¹⁰ Pollard’s lifestyle authenticated his message of God made flesh in Christ.

To Pollard’s amazement, many of the Miao ancestral legends and children’s rhymes were consistent with biblical themes: a creation story, a flood myth, even Noah’s ark.¹¹ For many Miao, the rest of the Bible filled in their gaps. In less than two decades, Pollard and his coworkers saw the conversion of more than 10,000 people. Churches, schools, medical clinics, a soccer field, even a swimming pool, followed. Mountainous and remote Shimenkan became known as “Heaven from Abroad” [*Haiwai tianguo*]. Over time, locals who previously feared doctors were studying medicine. Two of their own later went on to win doctorates. Pollard and his Miao coworkers even developed a written language for the Miao and translated the Bible and other literature into the language. Even today, Shimenkan’s Big Flowerly Miao continue to use the Pollard-script.

According to China scholar Zhang Tan’s thorough examination of Pollard’s life and the history of Shimenkan, there are no believers left.¹² The primary reason Zhang gives for this abrupt change is that the liberation that the Miao’s savior had given them was a freedom of the soul, not of politics and the flesh. When another savior appeared — the Chinese Communist Party — that could provide economic and political liberation, people began turning to socialism. Faith in Christ, Zhang concludes, expired out without a whimper.

ample, their ethnic neighbors in northwest Guizhou, the Yi people, though in the minority, enslaved many of them. Treated as less than human, the Big Flowerly Miao were housed with the animals and forced to eat out of the same stone troughs the animals used.⁹

Previously unknown and isolated, Shimenkan was put on the map by a foreigner: Samuel Pollard (1864-1915), a British missionary with the United Methodist Church who moved to Shimenkan in 1904. Even to Pollard, an experienced missionary, Shimenkan was the most wretched place he had seen in China.

After relocating to Shimenkan, at the time a village of a dozen families, Pollard lived the lifestyle of the Big

Based on Zhang Tan’s conclusions, I expected to find Shimenkan a fascinating piece of pre-revolution, foreign-missionary history. Nothing more. Even so, I could not help but wonder, given the crisis of belief I have observed in other areas of Guizhou Province, whether the faith of 10,000 people had in fact simply disappeared like a lost tribe.

Seven hours from Weining’s county-town, over dirt-packed gravel and sometimes sloppy mud roads, we finally arrived in Shimenkan. Constant rain and thick fog made the trip seem longer than it actually was.

Then there it was, just like the picture in Zhang Tan’s

⁹ Zhang Tan, *‘Zhai men’ qian de shimenkan* (The stone threshold in front of the narrow gate) (Kunming: Yunnan Education Press, 1992), 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 228.



Shimenkan remains a very poor area. Teenage boys, like the one pictured, tunnel on their bellies into holes in the sides of mountains just large enough for their bodies to scratch out clumps of coal for their bosses. The work is extremely dangerous — the tunnel can collapse at any time — and poorly paid.

book: Samuel Pollard's former home, now used as the Shimenkan township government offices.

Market day was just wrapping up when we pulled in the driveway, so we had many curious observers. The Big Flowery Miao I had read so much about circled around us. We exchanged the curious stares of distant strangers. A group of five especially friendly Big Flowery Miao women took a particular interest in Anne Thurston.

When we reappeared from the township government offices and our briefing with the officials, the women were patiently waiting. They presented Anne with a bag of cookies.

We were then led on a tour of Shimenkan's remnants of the past. Though a large earthquake shook the area in 1948, destroying many of the buildings, the original teacher-student dormitory, parts of the school, a leprosy clinic, Pollard's home, the soccer field and the swimming pool remain.

An enthusiastic band of locals followed us, including

the five women who were never far behind, enjoying the excitement. Having read the history of the Big Flowery Miao and Shimenkan, it was indeed remarkable to observe firsthand all that had been accomplished in an area that until 1958 was accessible only by narrow walking paths.

As daylight turned to dusk, light rain and a blanket of fog created an almost eerie atmosphere. The last stop of the tour was Samuel Pollard's tomb. Pollard died of typhoid in 1915 while tending to locals with the same disease. He and another missionary who followed him, Herbert Goldsworthy, are both buried on the top of a hill that overlooks Shimenkan. Our entourage, now about 20 strong, slowly worked its way up through waist-high brush in the heavy fog. A local official led the single-file line, thrashing rainwater off of the bushes.

Pollard's and Goldsworthy's tombs, originally built by the Miao churches, were badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution but later reconstructed by the Weining County government. Three languages on the tombs — English, Mandarin and Miao — commemorate their lives and contribution. Our group milled around the tombs



One of our entourage: a Big Flowerly Miao woman.

for about 20 minutes, reflecting on Shimenkan, the Big Flowerly Miao people and Samuel Pollard.

As we tracked back down the hill toward the road, I walked behind several of the Miao women, my mind full of thoughts of their past and questions about their present.

“Do you believe in Jesus?” I quietly asked the woman who walked in front of me, eager to know for myself if they or others in the area had carried on their pre-revolution faith.

“Yes, I believe,” the woman replied, turning her head with a smile.

“I am a believer, as well,” I replied, “That means we are one family.”

I sensed she was not the only one.

As we continued to walk, my travel companion, Jason, asked the women if there were only elderly women in their church.

No, they said, there are men as well, and young people,



Big Flowerly Miao children used to swim in the now-100-year-old swimming pool, built by Pollard. Spring water was directed from three kilometers away in order to fill the pool. The water was changed once a week.

and middle-aged people. Their church is their community.

“Are there many churches in Shimenkan?” I followed.

“*Duo de hen!*” [Very many!] She replied with a sparkle in her eye.¹³

It was almost dark and time for dinner. The tour was over. We did not know if we would see the Miao women again, so we said goodbye. An older woman came up to me and with strong hands that had obviously farmed for many years firmly grasped mine. With a penetrating look I will not forget, she said, “We will meet again in heaven. Pray for us, we will pray for you.”

The Big Flower Miao women, dressed in traditional

hemp skirts, blue blazers and muddy rain boot, stood quietly at the turn in the road as we walked off. As their figures began to disappear in the mist, they began to sing. We stopped, turned and listened.

The first song sounded like a Miao melody. It was beautiful, but I could not understand it. Then they began to sing a chorus in Mandarin, well known among believers of Christ around China: ‘*zai yesuli woman shi yi jia ren*’ [‘In Jesus we are one family’]. As they sang, I could see through the fog that several of them were wiping tears from their eyes with aprons that hung from their Miao skirts. They had met family; we had met living history — and vice versa.

With that taste of faith, I realized that Zhang Tan was wrong, or at least his information was incomplete. Religion, after all, appeared to be alive and well in Shimenkan.

When we went for breakfast the following morning, there they were: the same women from the previous evening, standing patiently down the road, now accompanied by several men. They walked up to us and presented us with a few dozen hard-boiled eggs and then returned to wait for us at their distant post.

With a bit of arm twisting, we were able to convince our hosts to allow us to visit a Miao village. Our tour the previous day had been around the township headquarters, immediate vicinity. We wanted more. The most convenient village for us to visit, it turned out, was the home of the women who had sung to us!

Within an hour we were off to their village, our urban hosts appearing less than enthusiastic about having to visit a poor Big Flowery Miao village.

We slipped and slid down a mud path as shepherds, wearing thick wool capes to protect them from the cool and rain, tended their sheep and goats on the lush shrub-covered mountains that surrounded us. Animals dotted the expansive landscape. The air was moist and clear.

Before long our entourage had arrived at their village. The village hovels were made of thick, tan, earthen walls and thatch roofs. Pigs moved in slow motion as chickens dashed through the inch-thick muck that



Big Flower Miao women at the tombs, standing quietly with baskets on their backs as they read the Miao script that commemorates Pollard's and Goldsworthy's lives and contributions.

¹³ During our briefing, township officials said that there are two approved places where some Miao gather at to worship, but that there are not many believers.

covered the village grounds. Big Flowery Miao began to gather as we mingled, standing around one of their homes.

We remained in the village just a few hours, chatting and even singing. My companions and I were struck with the sense of dignity among the people. Yes, they were very poor. But compared to dozens of other villages I have visited in Guizhou, there was an absence of apology for their backwardness (I am usually overwhelmed upon arrival with self-deprecating excuses for the people's poverty). These villagers made no excuses. In fact, *Moxi* [Moses], who appeared to be the local leader, stated confidently, "we are poor, but we are rich."

Moses, as the village spokesman, said that 40 out of the 50 families in the village believed in Christ. Most of them began to follow Christ in the 1980s. The villagers gather weekly to worship.

"What difference does your faith make to you?" I asked Moses as we stood around, county and township government officials included.

Moses replied under with the government's policy to protect freedom of religion, their community was strong. Then, calibrating his response, he added that they did not smoke, did not drink and did not carouse. His facial expressions communicated that there was a lot more he could have shared.

The sense of community also seemed quite strong. From the way they organized themselves to the way they related to one another, they appeared as one. You should have heard them sing! Old and young, men and women, they sang hymns in both Mandarin and Miao.

Before we said goodbye, I asked Moses if he had a Bible with him. I had a verse I wanted to present to their community as a gift. He reached in his bag and pulled out a Bible printed in Nanjing. I pointed to I Corinthians, chapter one, verses 26-28, and stepped back. Thoughts from Zhang Tan's history of Shimenkan and Pollard's journal flooded my mind as Moses, head down, read in silence:

"Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame

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The Big Flowery Miao women huddle in the fog as they sing 'zai yesuli woman shi yi jia ren' ['In Jesus we are one family'].

the strong; God chose the lowly of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

Moses, now at a distance, looked up at me in tears. We understood.

As the villagers, the officials and the three foreign visitors slowly proceeded back to the main road, the Big Flowery Miao began to sing again: 'In Jesus we are one family.'

One family with the despised and historically oppressed Miao of Shimenkan. It was a lot to take in.

Coming full circle from the rhetoric of the revolution, I have thought how fascinating and noteworthy it is that during this transitional period in China's history the search for meaning and community continues as it does: from shrines that dot Guizhou's countryside, to overflowing state-approved places of worship, to young women wearing jade Buddhas, to the Big Flowery Miao of Shimenkan and the members of Falun Gong, now under pressure.

The heart of the matter is that the people's quest will play an essential, albeit subtle, role in determining the nation's evolving future.

Sincerely,

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