

BOOK REVIEW

Unanswered Questions

The account of a missionary's daughter who went back to visit her first home at Hequ, Shanxi Province

Book Review by Foster Stockwell

We Signed Away Our Lives,
by Kari Torjesen Malcolm
Expanded 10th Anniversary Edition
Published by the William Carey Library

Before World War II, most of whatever Americans and Europeans knew about China came from the reports of Christian missionaries and was limited to the existence of poverty, use of chopsticks, foot binding, and opium. There was no knowledge or appreciation of China's 5,000-year-old civilization, its extensive philosophical and scientific contributions, or its fine literature as found in the novels *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Mansions*.

Now that China is open to the world, many of these missionaries are returning to this vast country as tourists and discovering facts that they failed to take note of when they worked there. Not only is this true of the missionaries but it is also the case with their children, drawn to China by a desire to once again see the places where they grew up.

This book is the account of one missionary's daughter who went back to visit her first home at Hequ, Shanxi Province. It is a story that has, in essence, been told before in number of books by other missionary children. However there are some unique differences. One is that her missionary parents were Norwegian; another is the fact that she, her mother, and two siblings were interned in a Japanese prison camp during World War II.

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When Kari lived in Hequ as a child, it was one of the most remote places in Shanxi, a city of 10,000 people who were “among the poorest and least educated in all China.” The city was the gateway to Inner Mongolia and its population was composed of both Chinese and Mongolians. That is where her father asked to go in 1921, after signing a commitment with his denomination that he would be willing to die in China.

Peter Torjesen, who she calls “Far” by the Norwegian designation for father (her mother was “Mor”) was a member of the China Inland Mission (CIM) a religiously conservative denomination established in England in 1865 by Hudson Taylor. Its participants were chosen on the basis of faith and prayer rather than extensive theological or medical training. Peter Torjessen was converted to the idea of going to China when he heard a sermon by Ludvig Hope, a noted Norwegian missions advocate, who promoted the need for missionaries in China.

After a short training stay in England, Torjesen headed for China by ship and then went overland to Hequ. Enthusiastically he wrote to his fiancé, who would soon join him, that “Hequ is part of a flat prairie with meadows to the East and the Yellow River winding its way through the West of the town like the Torridals River in Kristiansand” (their hometown in

Norway)...”And if you have plenty of time let’s take a walk on the Great Wall of China which has one arm reaching Hequ.”

Over time the two of them built a church and set up a health clinic and an elementary school, the first school in Hequ’s history to admit girls. They also raised four children, the author and her two brothers and sister. Life must have been quite difficult for this foreign family living in China with no set salary, depending on money contributed by CIM supporters in Europe, although the author says almost nothing about this.

She does include part of a letter her mother sent to Norway describing conditions during one of China’s famines, in which thousands died:

“It is so sad here in Hequ to see people selling their wives. Last year it was the famine that drove them to it, but things are still not normal and people can’t manage to eat. The saddest is to see homes broken. Motherless children cry for mother, unhappy mothers cry for their children, and the husband may begin to smoke opium to dull the pain, and end up as a beggar. In a home nearby the wife has been sold. We tried to help them last year and this year, but when everything had been eaten, the need was just as great.”

The author describes her father as a great story teller, whose sense of humor infected everyone. Among his duties was traveling around the area to visit other churches established by CIM missionaries. Her mother shared in the local church duties, often preaching sermons to the assembled converts.

After Japan invaded China in 1937, Japanese planes frequently bombed Hequ and so the Torjesen parents sent their four children to the far-away English-speaking school at Cheefoo, Shandong Province, in order to protect them from the bombs. Eventually one of these bombs stuck the building in which Peter Torjesen was working and killed him. A silk banner hung at his funeral

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reading: “He gave his life to save the people.” His obituary, printed in the New York Herald, said he was “the first missionary to die in the Japanese war against China.”

His wife continued to work at Hequ for a time until the Japanese finally forced her and all other missionaries to leave the area. She then went to Cheefoo to be with her children, only to be taken prisoner with all the school staff and children and to be interned at the Weih sien prison camp, also in Shandong Province.

The author describes the prison camp in this way: “There were twenty nationalities represented among the 1,600 prisoners, with businessmen, government officials, missionaries, prostitutes, junkies and assorted troublemakers that had enjoyed the freedom of being foreigners in China—far away from home. While we were not tortured as prisoners were in other camps, we received little food and lived with open cesspools, rats, flies, and disease.”

She identifies only one or two other prisoners by name. The one she has the greatest respect for is Eric Liddell, the British runner and missionary who achieved fame in the 1924 Olympics by winning the 400-meter-race. The event is well depicted in the Hollywood movie *Chariots of Fire*. All the children in the internment camp called him “Uncle Eric” because he brought hope to them by planning

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recreational activities for them during the day and, in the evening, playing chess with them and engaging them in quiet conversation. Liddell eventually died from a brain tumor in 1945 while at the prison, just five months before the defeat of Japan and the liberation of all the prisoners. At that time the author and her family were able to leave China and go first to the United States and then Norway.

The book is an easy read and tells us some things about what her parents did in Hequ to endear them to the people there, but she says nothing about the difficulties they must have faced in dealing with life in China, a country so different from Norway. What adjustment problems did they face? How did they become trained in the Chinese language? What problems did they have to deal with in arranging for the construction of their church, school, and clinic? Were there any problems related to the birth of their four children in a region where there were few, if any, Western doctors?

The author's apparent modesty prevents her from giving details about her own personal life and reaction to the events she describes. The book cries out for much more information about the author. For example, she says almost nothing about her experiences as a child in Hequ. Did she learn to speak Chinese before she learned Norwegian? Most of the missionary children born in China did. They learned the language from their amahs. Did her family speak Norwegian or Chinese in the home? Did their cook prepare Chinese or Norwegian meals? Did she have

Chinese playmates and what activities did she and her siblings engage in? She never explains why her brother, Hakon, feared going to the English school at Cheefoo because he could not speak any English, while she apparently could. Where had she learned the language? These kinds of questions pop up in reading nearly every chapter.

The chapter she devotes to her 1988 return to Hequ, when it was still not an open city, shows her genuine appreciation for the modern development of China. She visited the remnants of her family's house, met people who remembered her father and mother, and was treated to a celebration dinner in her honor. Perhaps the most intriguing incident in this return visit was her meeting the county governor, who turned out to be the son of her family's gatekeeper.

On the whole this is an interesting book, though one that may frustrate any reader without much knowledge of pre-revolutionary China or appreciation for the role of the CIM in building churches throughout the country.

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Foster Stockwell grew up in China (12 years), first in Fujian Province, and then in Szechuan Province (city of Chengdu) as the son of American missionaries.

He returned to the U.S. just before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. For 20 years was a senior editor for World Book Encyclopedia in Chicago, and for 10 years was the publishing director for China Books and Periodicals in San Francisco. Has written six published books, two of which are about China (Religion in China Today, and Westerners in China) and has traveled to China more than 15 times over the past 25 years, working as a polisher and consultant for the Foreign Languages Press in Beijing. He is now retired and living in Des Moines, Washington.