

五十八

On bus, train, and foot
traveling as we were able
we followed God's trio
French sisters and Cable
in the '20s they lived
with peasants of Gobi
saw God in sand grains
mud homes like adobe



Chapter 58 – God in the Gobi

“A place of desolation” murmured one of my companions.

“I was fully aware of the acute terror with which the Chinese regard the Gobi regions, and I was determined to get a better understanding of the outlook from these men who lived on the very edge of the desert yet always turned away from it with a shudder and hurried toward the noisy clatter of the drill-ground and the barrack-room.”

“‘It is desolate,’ I said, ‘but in the silence and solitude, God is still there.’”



So begins a travelogue unlike any I have heretofore encountered. The story of three women who, not once, but five times, travelled the entire length of the Gobi Desert. For nearly 30 years, at the turn of the 20th century, “the trio”, sisters Eva and Francesca French, and Mildred Cable, were part of the China Inland Mission, a Christian mission unaffiliated with any particular church or denomination which actively recruited both laypeople and single women into its service. Eva (Evangeline) French was a passionate woman whose upbringing in France and Switzerland in no way presaged who she was to become. Before converting to Christianity, Eva had described herself as “the fervid Nihilist, the incipient Communist, the embryonic Bolshevik.”

But when she finally did find her calling and faith, she embraced it fervently and signed on for a mission in China. Eva was the first of “the trio” to arrive in China in 1893. These were tumultuous times in the ‘middle kingdom’. The Empress Dowager Ci Xi was captain of a sinking marble boat that was the Qing Dynasty and Eva found herself in the middle of the Boxer Rebellion, not a healthy place for a foreign missionary in 1900. Reports came to Eva’s family that she had been killed by the Boxers and her mother fell into a depression she was never able to fully recover from, even after they discovered that the report of Eva’s death was erroneous. In 1908, Francesca joined her sister in China. At around the same time, Mildred Cable, an English woman who had grown up in a very strict religious family where she was constantly threatened by tales of God’s punishment to sinners, also answered “the call” she had felt as a young woman. Mildred Cable had planned to take that call with her fiancé, but he abandoned his plans to become a missionary and begged Mildred to stay. Her decision to forsake marriage and to follow God into Boxer China, was never in question. Although she momentarily pined the loss of her love, serving others and spreading the gospel ultimately won out. The first person she met upon her arrival in China was Eva French.

When I stumbled into this amazing book, [The Gobi Desert](#), I was immediately taken by the detailed descriptions of both the environment and the connections these women had been able to establish with the people they encountered. Unlike most missionaries, the French sisters and Cable adapted quite quickly to whatever environment they found themselves in. They learned to speak multiple Chinese dialects and lived their lives adapting to the local diet, wearing the same kinds of clothes as their neighbors, and living in the same kinds of homes as did the people they were serving. The more I read, the more I realized that they were not merely assuming these lifestyles out of duty, all three of these amazing women seemed to find satisfaction, joy, and beauty in their new surroundings and found value in and respect for both the people and the environments they encountered.

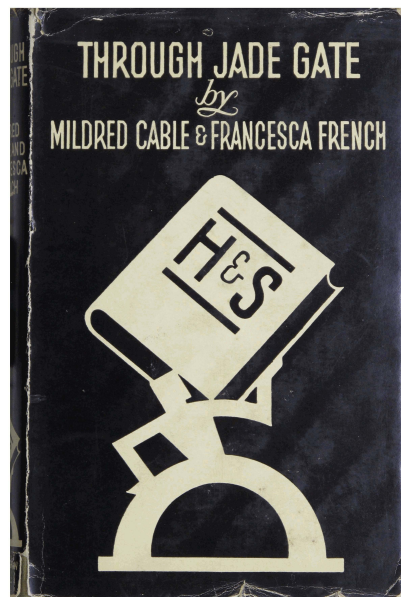
They were also dedicated to improving the lot of women in China. Not only did they want to train girls and women to carry on their missionary and evangelical work in China, they also wanted to introduce “Christian values” to illiterate Chinese peasant women by teaching young women science, the classics, literature, as well as addressing more difficult subjects such as foot-binding and infanticide.

What continued to both haunt me and draw me into this book were the descriptions of minutiae – those elements that surround us but most of us are blind to. Instead of describing the sand of the Gobi as hills or dunes, or even grains, their sand reminded me of William Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* (“To see the World in a grain of sand, . . .”)

“Their flooring mainly consists of a wide expanse of sand or stone-littered plains, but a wealth of detailed variety hides itself under a superficial guise of monotony, and to the close observer each day’s march has a definite stamp of individuality. By reason of their vivid and varied colorings, these stones are one of Gobi’s features of beauty, and sometimes the narrow, faint path passes through a litter of small multi-colored pebbles, which are rose-pink, pistachio-green, tender peach, lilac, white, sealing-wax-red and black burnished by sand, sun, and wind as though black-leaded, the whole, mixed with a quantity of orange-tinted cornelian, forming a matchless mosaic.” (from Cable, Mildred, and Francesca French. *The Gobi Desert*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1942.)

Through the Jade Gate by Mildred Cable and Francesca French 1927 is available free on-line

<https://pahar.in/pahar/Books%20and%20Articles/Tibet%20and%20China/1927%20Throuogh%20Jade%20Gate%20and%20Central%20Asia%20by%20Cable%20s.pdf> p.35 leaving Lanzhou



MILDRED CABLE & FRANCESCA FRENCH

THROUGH JADE GATE
and
CENTRAL ASIA

*An Account of Journeys in Kansu,
Turkestan and the Gobi Desert*



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