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## Among the Last: An Arkansas Missionary Confronts a Changing China

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**Among the Last:  
An Arkansas Missionary Confronts a Changing China**

S. Ray Granade

4/10/1998

“I had thought to have more time...,” Irene Branum remarked to her diary about a Sunday School class during her first June in China. The observation proved prophetic. The woman who hoped to spend the rest of her years in China would leave before her Biblically-allotted lifespan was half over.

Irene Thelma Branum started her first diary almost by happenstance. A small five-year diary, readily identifiable by generations of young girls who penned their lives there with greater or lesser diligence, arrived in a box from the Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU) at Seymour, Missouri. Her first entry, for March 25, 1946, revealed her future: conferences with Drs. Theron Rankin and Baker James Cauthen of the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign Mission Board.

Meetings and paperwork, physicals and injections, reading and train travel to Richmond, Virginia filled the time until “THE DAY,” April 9. She spent the morning at Foreign Mission Board headquarters being examined about her call and conversion, the Bible, and her ability to work under nationals. That evening, she joined others for the formal appointment ceremony, with its charge by Dr. Rankin. After a heady evening of phone calls to friends and loved ones and a tinge of somber reflection occasioned by letter-writing, she finally fell into bed at 1:30 the next morning. She had been, to use an analogy common to Christianity and commissioning services everywhere, reborn.

After two days of sightseeing, conferences, and picture sessions, the newly-commissioned missionary returned to the applause of friends and well-wishers in the WMU Training School (the Carver School) at Louisville, Kentucky. That return was punctuated by meetings and presentations to one group or another as a new mission appointee. Lurking amidst the meetings were more specific hints of Irene’s future—learning to make Chinese buttons and puppets, participating in the China workshop, and, in late April, collecting “stuff for ‘China’.”

Nurse Branum had been born 18 August 1917 in Leslie, Arkansas. After RN certification from Missouri Baptist Hospital School of Nursing, she was graduated from Ouachita Baptist College in 1945 with a degree in Biology and Bible. The Foreign Mission Board accepted her application in 1946, and she followed a familiar course for Arkansans.

Though the first Southern Baptist missionary had been appointed to China, the first Southern Baptist missionary from Arkansas went to Nigeria in 1884, as did the second in 1888. The third, Mable Earp Saunders, was the first of Arkansas' "China contingent," appointed to serve there in 1901. Before 1920, ten Arkansas natives had gone as Southern Baptist missionaries: four to Nigeria, four to China, and two to Mexico. Between 1884 and 1960, seventy-five Arkansas natives were appointed as Southern Baptist missionaries. Twenty went to Brazil (seven in the 1950s), fourteen to China, and ten to Nigeria. China was not Arkansans' first field of service, but it was unquestionably their most significant during the time that they could serve there, especially in the 1940s.

Irene was part of the greatest influx of Arkansans into a single Southern Baptist mission field during a single decade. Eight Arkansans went to China during the 1940s, where they joined three others for a total contingent of eleven. But no more would be appointed after them; Branum would be one of the last three Arkansans appointed to serve Southern Baptists in China for over three decades. It was her fortune to be appointed just as American attempts to mediate continuing Nationalist/Communist animosity in China were breaking down. As she trained for her new appointment, full-scale civil war broke out.

In the summer of 1946, when the Chinese civil war was beginning in earnest, sewing, gardening, and nursing delineated those of Irene's days not consumed by trips to the SBC meeting in Miami in mid-May, around Arkansas and Missouri, and to Ridgecrest, in North Carolina. At Ridgecrest in mid-August, she heard Dr. Bill Wallace of China and enjoyed Drs. Latourette and Van as well as the "Oriental group" and their get-togethers. On September 5, she finished packing for Yale's Institute of Chinese Studies and got her ticket. At New Haven in mid-month she found herself "moving in a strange world," far from the safety and familiarity of a Baptist South.

The pace of language study she found daunting. “New words before we learn the old,” Irene noted, and concluded that evening listening sessions “will be a nightly business.” A brisk pace demanded long hours. She spent most evenings on the language, once noting a 4.5-hour session and later another 5.5 hours—“the most I’ve done in one day.” Her history work caused some anxiety, but nothing like the language. Mid-November and the first grading period revealed that she had done OK in history; Chinese was “Not good!!” Then it all seemed to fall together, and when she heard a Christian Chinese general speak a month later, she could supplement the interpreter’s words with “some” understanding of her own.

After Christmas break at home, the joys of family gatherings and a quiet, snowy New Years’ at her parents’ Missouri farm, Irene returned to New Haven and another meeting with Dr. Rankin in early 1947. He revealed that she was still slated for China as a nurse-missionary but told her nothing else definite: she would probably sail in late August, probably spend a year in Peking, then probably go to Cheng ghow or Yangchow. China’s growing civil war exacerbated typical missionary life uncertainties.

Irene’s early preparation for China fell naturally into three categories: studies (especially language), religious exercises, and shopping. The young Arkansas native had to prepare for China’s cold (a knowledgeable friend had called an early December day—“very cold, clear but wind blowing”—a “typical Peking day”) with “snuggies,” union suits, wool vests, thick socks, boots, wool gloves, ski outfits, and a thick brown garment she dubbed her “China coat.”

Religious exercises were designed to feed her soul and to prepare her for ministry. She participated in the usual worship services, prayer meetings, and Bible study groups. She gave her testimony, participated in religious drama, and on occasion led groups of various ages. Arguably the height of her religious preparation came when she discovered that the Compton Heights Baptist Church (St. Louis) had named a WMU circle for her, thus adopting her as their special project, to be upheld in prayer and other, more tangible ways. Spread through the months were testaments to the faithfulness of the churches which would support her. The women who undergirded Southern Baptist missionary work through the WMU

helped Irene prepare for her upcoming service with everything from gloves and towels to money and a new typewriter.

In late January, Irene added a fourth element to her China preparations: first-hand experience with Chinese and their ways. That evening she had three Chinese nurses (“Lovely people”) over for a meal and to tour the Institute at which she had just finished her exams. Four days later she ventured into Chinese cuisine—a friend directed her in preparing a Chinese meal which she pronounced “good.”

On February 24, 1947, a red letter day for the aspiring missionaries, assignments arrived. In block letters in her diary, Irene printed “HWANGHSIEN, with Dr. N.A. Bryan possibility after Peking depending on conditions.” Continuation of hostilities in China made it difficult to turn possibilities into probabilities; only language study in Peking was certain.

Sandwiched in among the formal studies were lectures by eminent thinkers, missionaries, and theologians; musical concerts and recitals; lectures on Chinese culture; occasional trips; meetings with Southern Baptist or “Yale in China” groups; and guests with whom they shared meals—including a woman from the China Inland Mission.

In March, she began a course of medical lectures by nurses and doctors on all aspects of public health as the culmination of her education there. By May, she was admitting to “little”—and on occasion “VERY little”—studying. The departure of friends and packing drew her attention instead—along with preparations for China. Passport pictures (“awful but will do”) and purchases for China (including furniture) took precedence over reviewing. May’s end brought exams and graduation exercises, then goodbye to Yale.

Once home, Irene’s preparations accelerated. Injections (typhoid, cholera, and typhus), X-rays, dental attention, and blood work ensured that physical preparation would match the intellectual and spiritual. Presentations to WMU circles, churches, and Vacation Bible Schools interrupted the incessant sewing of everything from sleepwear to suits. Steel box after steel box, footlockers, a home-made big wooden box, and even large suitcases filled with food, clothes, and all the necessities of life. By mid-August, she had shipped eight pieces of freight and still had more to go. As August ended, she got her money, dispatched the last of her

freight, and boarded a train heading west. In San Francisco, she took care of last-minute details (like getting a British visa) before her September 5 departure. With a sense of excitement leavening the difficulty of goodbyes, she sailed under Golden Gate Bridge into the sunset.

The voyage provided bonding time with “the Baptist group,” which worshipped, testified, and sang together, and with others (some of those she’d met at Yale). Customs declarations and time in a deck chair alternated with “singspirations,” reviewing Yale lessons, and talks by people like the Home Secretary of the China Inland Mission. On September 17, her ship docked briefly in Yokohama before heading for Hong Kong, which they reached four days later. There Irene made her first Baptist pilgrimage in China—to the grave of Henrietta Hall Shuck, first American evangelical woman missionary to go to China, who died in late 1844, at 27, during her 5th child’s birth.

For September 23, 1947, she wrote “Arrived in China! Praise God!” The ship anchored at the Yangtze Dock in enough heat to give her a terrific headache. Three days later, her baggage made it through customs. After finding all but one piece of her freight, she went to Soochow for her second Baptist pilgrimage—“flag raising at Yates Academy (named for Matthew T. Yates, SBC missionary appointed to Shanghai in 1846),”—before going to Shanghai for the Moon Festival. The next day she spent at the customs godown, and did the same thing again the day after. She had thought to finish early, but the Express company could get no coolies; the freight sat until late afternoon. On the third day, she went to the Express office to finish her paper work, only to be put off. The next day, again “nothing could be done.” Finally, on Saturday, the fifth day, she got started on “a mess” of paperwork. After a day’s work, she had a summary and the hope that things were finally in “fair order to leave.”

On October 5, she flew to Peking—an eight-hour flight—and was overjoyed to see the school and some Yale friends. After morning devotions the next day, she got a schedule for classes, but found “Everything confusion.” On the 7th she began classes “in a daze,” then shopped for a lamp because evening studies were interrupted when the lights went out—“as usual!!!” The next day she was “still confused” and

wished for her freight—chilly weather and her surroundings forced her to borrow clothing and a dictionary.

Irene's first two weeks in China, spent at Shanghai and Peking, set the stage for her experiences there until her departure from Peking in August, 1948. For almost a year, she recorded studies, sightseeing, economic matters, and conditions around her. Those recordings reflected unfamiliarity with the country and its weather, in some cases inadequate preparations, and above all the uncertainties of a nation in the midst of civil war.

While in Peking, Irene made the rounds of the customary attractions: in the first few months, she went to the Summer Palace, the Jade Fountain, and the Western Hills, and took a pedicab ride to see the Altar of Heaven by moonlight. She visited numerous temples and Yenching University. A month after her arrival in China she made the obligatory visit "to Great Wall, on it, and through it into Mongolia." She also performed other obligatory visits—to the American Consul and the police station to register.

After 1948 began, Branum visited the Lama Temple and the Confucian Temple, the Temple of Heaven and the Forbidden City. She revisited Yenching University, the Summer Palace, Temple of Heaven, and the Great Wall. She remarked on natural and human phenomena—migrating geese and the firemen's golden helmets and an old man helping an old woman along street (which she found "most unusual"). But the Forbidden City marked both the high and low point of her sightseeing.

Some sightseeing involved holidays as well as particular locations. In Shanghai, Irene had enjoyed the Moon Festival a week after her arrival. In Peking, she found the Dragon Boat Festival equally entrancing in early June, 1948. But not all holidays elicited unequivocal pleasure. By the Chinese New Year's, February 10, 1948, Irene had felt reasonably comfortable finding her way around Peking. She and a friend went out the East Gate that evening, where she "saw people burning incense and bowing before idols."

Two weeks after her New Year's stroll, Irene ventured to the Forbidden City's park for a fireworks display. Public celebration joined location to produce her most frightening experience. At the display,

Branum got caught in the crowd and pushed through the gate. She fell to her knees and couldn't rise. Finally she pushed her way up, went several steps, and fell again. Others did the same. A panic ensued. Though she escaped eventually, she was very scared, she told her diary, and would not do that again "if I can help it." Bruised and sore the next day, she heard that other women had been injured and some children killed in the trampling panic.

Some of her sightseeing was professional rather than personal. Irene viewed a public health clinic, several hospitals and, in late April, 1948, the newly-opened Peking University Medical Center—which she pronounced nice and well-equipped—"some equipment like I had never seen."

Her studies assumed lesser prominence in her diary, perhaps because of lesser rigor, her previous instruction, or the variety around to occupy her. She would occasionally mention studying, mostly around exam times: early December, February, June, and again briefly in July. The student she taught English got more diary space than any other instructional matter. Perhaps most telling was her late January observation that she was skipping classes because "no one else comes."

If language studies had little place in her diary, the same cannot be said of economic issues. Rarely a day, and certainly never a week, passed without some reference to money—sometimes income, most often outgo. The theme to it all was inflation.

In mid-October, 1947, less than a month after her arrival, Irene noted that her board bill for the next two weeks would come to almost a million. Sightseeing had cost her \$50,000; some printing, \$135,000 for 75 copies of letters. But her September check had made her a millionaire thrice over, and the one for October converted to over 4 million. In early December, she noted that the exchange rate had hit the \$200,000 mark; by July, 1948, it was near 7 million. Shortly after that inflation improved: "Rumors of peace talks here in China; currency more stable for few days," Irene reported in late July. But nothing stopped for long the inflation that had required a \$10 million supplement for her in late February. Chinese currency was in freefall that summer; she paid \$173 million for some white sandals and remarked that she and a friend "went out to spend our money before the value dropped." As quickly as possible she converted the



increasingly-worthless cash into goods: food, clothing, cloisonné, brass work, jewelry (especially pins), embroidery, and items to cope with increasingly-common utility outages.

Economics supplied one theme to Irene's diary during her first year in China, but the chaos around her supplied the other major theme. They were, of course, sides of the same coin. Economic chaos reflected the growing civil war, but so did chaos in the infrastructure and, to Irene's eyes, most other conditions.

Irene's experience with her baggage in Shanghai would be mirrored in virtually everything she undertook. Everything took longer, was more complex, and worked worse than she anticipated. Transportation was particularly unruly. She often remarked about the unpredictability of any public transport. Schedules seemed non-existent, breakdowns common. Pedicabs were as reliable as walking, but nothing else was.

Unreliable transportation meant shipping delays. Mail was abominably slow—magazines were always months behind their publication dates, and even letters sometimes seemed mis-routed they took so long. When her steel boxes arrived in Peking in early March, 1948 (after being shipped the previous August), she got the ones she didn't want first and the others later. The first item she unpacked? Her "China coat," just in time for Spring! Handling matched delays. When her trunks reached Peking, she found her typewriter workable but misaligned and some bottles broken.

Transportation problems might be worrisome, but utility problems caused her equal grief. Irene's comment about utilities during her first China shopping foray (that the lights had gone out "as usual!!!") reappeared with regularity and involved all aspects.

At the end of October she rejoiced when the "Heat came on just a little today." Lack of heat made church services impossible to attend during some of the winter. In mid-December, 1947, she noted "Water off lots of the time also electricity in early evening." Sometimes the lights were out all evening. Officials changed the time about every other month, trying to synchronize the workday with daylight as much as possible but creating havoc with schedules in the process. As late as mid-July, when she was making a record to send home, she encountered the dread condition: "no electricity to finish my record."

Weather provided some of the chaos—she discovered the accuracy of the Yale acquaintance’s observation about typical Peking days. The cold bothered her, as she often remarked on trying to find heaters and borrowing warm clothes to layer. Worse than the cold were the winter and spring dust storms, which limited visibility to a few feet. Driving snow, ice, and dust before it, the wind seemed to penetrate everything. For Irene, the eclipse of the sun she saw on the way to church at the beginning of the second week in May, 1948, portended nothing good.

The chaos which bothered her most was societal, and focused on the city’s students. They provided an important barometer for the civil war, and their activities merged with Americans’ anxiety about the war’s progress and outcome.

Irene’s first intimation of student activity came through her classes on Chinese dialects, instructed by local university students. In early April, student strikes canceled the classes. In early June, Irene discovered that a poster she had not understood advertised a planned demonstration against American aid to Japan. Gathering crowds kept her off the streets. In early July, as summer school started, “Some sort of student demonstration” resulted in officials putting the city under martial law. Less than a week later, more student demonstrations resulted in another martial law decree.

Irene used information about abroad and her new home to keep the chaos at bay. She and friends gathered around the radio in November, 1947, to hear Princess Elizabeth’s wedding. In a letter from home that arrived in January, 1948, Irene learned that the Changchow hospital had been evacuated. In July she found out that Southern Democrats had walked out of their Convention and formed the Dixiecrats. Just before she left Peking, Irene learned of another evacuation.

Irene also kept the chaos at bay by clinging to comforts of the past. Irene’s first Thanksgiving in China found her banqueting with other Americans and worshipping at the Union Church. Her Christmas was more spectacular. The Christmas season provided a carol concert at church—“It was very pretty, big crowd, many Chinese”; a rendition of “Messiah” by the Yenching choir which made her think of the Ouachita choir and observe that she “had not thought to hear it this year”; and “A Christmas Carol” at the American school. She celebrated Easter with a traditional sunrise service—even though it took place in the Temple of

Heaven. Sometimes the hedge was as simple as a customary dish of ice cream with friends on the sun roof of their building while they discussed whatever topics grabbed their attention.

Another hedge against the chaos was the certitude of her profession and the pleasures of the printed word (in English). Irene enjoyed reading books occasionally (she mentioned *The Gauntlet* by Baptist minister-turned-novelist James Street), as well as a mix of periodicals like the *American Journal of Nursing*, *Word and Way*, *Christian Life and Times*, and *Reader's Digest*.

Perhaps the best hedge was her growing ability to function in the new environment. Her initial observation about Sunday services in Chinese (“understood very little”) was gradually replaced by more comprehension. By December, a visit from a woman who related her experiences “and how to talk to Chinese” left her “So happy to be able to talk so much in Chinese.” Chinese phrases crept into her diary; at the last of February she gave her first talk in Chinese (which left her feeling like someone else had done it). She found herself getting accustomed to the food—every Thursday after January the school served Chinese. And she even tried her hand at reading the newspaper. She wasn’t completely at home, though—she confessed in March that she had enjoyed a Presbyterian service tremendously; “guess that is cause I understood a good bit.”

Undoubtedly Irene’s favorite hedge against the uncertainties of her present was the arrival of “care packages” from home. Necessities like soap, tissues, film, and even scotch tape showed up in boxes from home. Not-so-necessities also showed up sometimes; in March she and friends sat up late eating newly-arrived sardines and talking.

In a June 19 conference with Dr. Cauthen, Irene learned her future, her next step in China: Kweilin, northwest of Hong Kong. On July 13, she discovered the job: Superintendent of Nurses at the hospital there. The next day, for the first time, Nurse Branum heard the sound that would determine the length of her stay in China: “Heard some big guns going off—woke me up—someone said windows shook.”

Irene packed her trunks, banded them with steel bands, painted her name on them, and sent them on their way to her new address. The day before the anniversary of her departure for China, she got her travel

permits from the police. On the last day of August, 1948, she flew from Peking to Shanghai.

She left behind a period of transition in place and activity. Despite being a student, she had volunteered in a public health clinic weekly in July and August, even though “I sometimes wonder how much good we really do.” She had learned much about China and the Chinese, including adoring Peking Duck suppers. She had talked to the guide at the Confucian temple about Christ and given him a tract. Most importantly, she had met and learned to love a wide variety of Chinese individuals—“Lovely students,” other nurses, and especially a boys’ Sunday School class with which she had spent a great deal of time (and had thought to have more).

On her first day in Shanghai, Irene learned that she had not left behind the sounds she had heard in Peking: “Heard big explosion during lunch.” The civil war that sound heralded would never be far from her mind or the plans that would be made and remade in the Kweilin compound.

Between Shanghai and Kweilin, Branum visited Yangchow to see its hospital and go over their records and procedures and those for organizing a nursing school. Back in Shanghai, she supervised some packing and repacking before flying to her new duty station on September 25. Her departure day offered omens, both ill. An early morning wake-up call revealed that thieves had stolen parts off the car in the Shanghai compound during the night; and just before landing in Kweilin, the missionary-nurse suffered a bout of airsickness.

Superintendent of Nurses Branum spent a week getting settled and learning the hospital and compound and their routines. She found all the problems she had seen in Peking—the chaos of poor transportation, uncertain utilities, and runaway inflation. In addition, they were now her problems, along with a few others, when she assumed her responsibilities October 1.

Irene faced problems of theft—food from shipments; blankets from the hospital; and personal items belonging to various staff. She dealt with personnel issues—finding replacements for frightened coolies and nurses who left, often without notice; scheduling rotations equitably; firing incompetent or larcenous employees and then replacing them; finding adequate compensation for employees in the face of runaway inflation.

She handled a move from one building to another for the hospital—and then another back again. She faced the logistics of patient care, from laundry to food, and did so in the face of increasing numbers (from 54 to 77 in a month) and decreasing staff. She had to plan and conduct staff education (both language and medical). And she even had to handle rounds and assisting in patient care on the wards and in the operating room.

As November succeeded October, her world began to change again. She attended her first Chinese wedding, which included no wine but some strange features nonetheless, and noted on that occasion a reality of Chinese life—“Everything ran about 1 hour late.” The changes in cultural appreciation paled in comparison to the roller coaster that began when, on November 11, she ruminated to her diary that “What little news we do hear is bad” and wondered how things really were in Peking: “We feel some times that we’ll only be here a few months more—might as well start eating out of our pantry.” From that day on, the civil war became an almost constant diary topic.

A week after this initial entry, a returning staffer brought news that allowed them to relax. Then, the next day, they got word that many missionaries were leaving for the States. Right after Thanksgiving, they were “all about ready to pack a trunk and get it started on.” Four days later, on December 2, the leadership at Canton telegraphed to say there would be no immediate evacuation. Less than two weeks later, they were packing up “frantically” and sending trunks out.

New Years, 1949, offered no respite from bad news. Although the missionaries had been invited to the Governor’s, transportation failure delayed their arrival until the festivities had ended. They were reduced to washing their clothes in their tubs. Those who could converted their salary checks into gold. All watched the influx of well-dressed refugees from the North, and assumed that the flow confirmed the rumor of January 23 that Peking had fallen.

Peking had indeed fallen before the Chinese New Years on January 29. As February and March came and went, the civil war’s divisiveness invaded the compound. Servant problems erupted, but so did revival. The revival involved Chinese students from two nearby universities, but ushered in its own problems as Communist victories continued. The

church voted for closed communion as the Christians began to circle their wagons.

In early May, couriers bringing in groceries and hospital supplies reported that the American consul had said “we might have two months” but that it was time to think of leaving. On May 4, Irene observed that “It surely is hard to decide what is best to do. Everyone had heard that we have been ordered to leave.” The next day, the station met and urged that women and children leave, a plan to which Irene vehemently objected. Once again the station engaged in a frantic round of packing and sent more things off by boat and plane. Irene noted that she was sleeping on the floor.

By late May, one local nurse was guessing that the station had about three months left. The missionary doctors had departed. Remaining station members began to distribute relief goods equally to all those working in the hospital. Then, in early June, Dr. Cauthen arrived with the first sign of good news. Fellow Arkansan Cliff and his wife Ann Harris, appointed to China the same year as Irene, would be coming along with another missionary, Charles Culpepper. The Harris’s impending arrival, Irene told her diary, changed “the whole situation” for her, though she remained undecided about what to do.

One thing she would have to do was go to Canton and renew her passport and secure another British visa. Then she would have to take “the fast train” to Hong Kong for Chinese visas. A missionary conference in Canton gave her the opportunity in late June and early July. It was a good conference, she reported, with only Bill Wallace and two others absent.

After her return to Kweilin, she observed her first literal Chinese funeral and a figurative one. The mid-July diary entry mentioning the funeral was followed by the report of a young Chinese Christian who “has withdrawn from us & the church” for fear of the Communists. By mid-August, people were once again getting “nervous.” A rumor circulated that Mao Tse Tung was dead, but Irene discounted it. It was difficult to retain adequate nurses and equally difficult to keep strangers out of the old hospital building. Right after her birthday, Irene decided to send her diary out with another load, and commenced keeping her story in a steno pad.

By late August, revival and attempted suicides shared the steno pad's pages. On October 1, 1949, the Communists proclaimed the existence of the People's Republic of China and continued pushing the Nationalists south. Less than two weeks later, Hengyang fell and the Communists were in the area. Their presence, Irene reported, did not affect the revival.

Kweilin station had reason to be concerned about the Communist presence. In mid-April, Irene had noted that the missionaries' frankness was "not taken as such" and that "We find we are on the side of the opposition force." Wuchow station, which Irene and several others had hoped to visit in early October, had been Bill Wallace's residence, and the Communists had killed him there. When Kweilin city officials left on November 21, Irene could only note "Situation worse." The police vanished in the night, and November 22 would be "Liberation Day."

Rumors flew on the 22nd, people threw things into the compound over the walls, and a former teacher and her family joined strangers seeking refuge there from the looting all feared would start after dark. Great billows of smoke to the south convinced numbers to try to get on the trucks carrying retreating soldiers away from town. Harris and Culpepper, seeking to maintain some semblance of normality in the face of change, laid out a tennis court in the compound while explosions testified to the retreating army's scorched earth policy. Destruction of the telegraph office—which blew out several windows in several of the compound's living quarters—was the first of many frequent bombings by airplanes. Irene noted that students in her English class for nurses, "girls...[with] previous war experience," wouldn't stay in the building after the first airplane dropped a bomb—even though the bomb fell far away.

Inside the compound, residents made everything as secure as possible and planned a watch through the night. In the midst of preparations, the sound of firecrackers resounded through the compound. A local nurse asked "Who would be getting married today?" Irene remarked that it sounded like a welcoming party to her. As she watched hundreds of people surging through the streets toward the town's center, she heard them chant "They've come, They've come!" and glimpsed the first columns of Communist troops.

Most of the staff joined the crowds and watched the students greet the army. Irene felt that God truly answered prayer: “we had prayed that when they came it would be fast and it really was. Only about 4 hours in No Mans Land. We really felt liberated from the night or nights (we didn’t know which) of terror and looting. No one really expected them to get here quite so quick.” Still, she admitted to being “a little tense,” particularly after an airplane’s strafing run over the main part of the city.

Communist occupation of the city only intensified uncertainty. A government airplane circled and dropped a small bomb the first day before ground fire repelled it. Compound residents played volley ball and ping pong and even tennis spasmodically behind their walls, wrote long-postponed letters, and took in occasional refugees. Posters began to appear and then proliferate in town on building walls and even trees. By Thanksgiving, Irene expressed her ignorance of the content but belief that it was “not uplifting.” Townspeople began to spend their days in nearby caves for fear of airplanes, and compound residents particularly appreciated friendly visits like those by Thanksgiving dinner attendees.

As news began to filter in by month’s end, the first mail in a long time brought news of more significant towns being liberated and consolidation of power by the insurgents. Worship service attendance rose even as some from the compound left for insurgent military service, as soldiers appeared on duty outside the gates, as more slogans appeared on walls, and as residents (natives and missionaries) received “visitors—experienced questioners.”

Early December brought news that former students had joined the new army propaganda corps; more questioners arrived; officials began registering compound residents and seeking detailed information from and about them. Westerners in the compound began wearing Chinese clothing and ceased handing out tracts. Their contacts with the world outside the compound generally occurred through the agency of local friends. Compound residents felt increasingly besieged and, like locals, endured “verbal persecution” outside the walls.

Not all found the occupiers oppressive; Irene consistently noted particularly the presence of female as well as male soldiers and the departure of females for military service. Nor were the soldiers uniformly



hostile to compound Christians. Several times after December began, Irene noted encounters with or visits from soldiers who self-identified as Christians or had been educated by Christian educators or cared for in Christian medical facilities. Occasionally Christian soldiers would appear for services, though they had to change from and return to their uniforms to attend. Of one such, a female, Irene noted that “She sure did seem to enjoy being with Christians.”

By mid-December, the compound settled into a new sense of normal. The station agreed to put all arable compound land into garden plots, particularly for hospital use. The Communists “widely proclaimed” religious liberty, and known Christians entered local government service. Still, Irene noted in her diary, “We must be more careful of our magazines,” especially since word was out about the closing of small country churches in two counties. The “noon gun,” a product of the previous regime’s effort to provide “public time,” returned to duty, prompting Irene to hope that “we can do better about the time now.” The government officially took over the school, which was just as well since teachers disciplining students was a thing of the past: “They do as they please.” Irene thought the change for the worse; government schools, she sniffed, merely teach students to sing and dance.

The diary confirms that some of the new normal replicated the old normal. When one Westerner challenged the Chinese pastor about voting for deacons, Irene noted that “She must fear someone will be elected she doesn’t like.” A Chinese boy working in the hospital confessed that his friend had been hired in the hospital because he would clean toilets; he had “contracted out” the task to the boy, who cleaned the toilets but gave the money to his friend while keeping gifts of clothing. In less than a month after regime change, people were beginning to relax and “go about business as before.” Worship service attendance decreased to normal levels. Perhaps most significantly, the compound’s—and indeed the Christians’—community situation depended more on local administrators than on central government edicts. Where Bill Wallace had been shot, Kweilin compound missionaries and other occupants were safe. Shortly before Christmas, Irene inadvertently revealed why. On the 19th, after a Communist City Planning meeting attended by the hospital’s Chinese chief of staff, a man stopped him to ask whether or not Dr. Ou remembered

him. The man turned out to be the area's military leader, and revealed that Dr. Ou had taught him in the local Baptist High School. The governor, the military leader mentioned obliquely, "approved of mission hospitals here." Personal connections rather than ideology determined the order of the day.

As Christmas approached, Irene recorded one momentous event without comment. Bad weather had forced local officials to postpone a "liberation celebration," for which people had been practicing for a month. On Christmas Eve, the weather cleared and the celebration proceeded. Drums kept up a relentless beat, making Irene think more of Africa than China. Students danced in the streets, parading up and down streets costumed as "farmers, laborers, washwomen, doctors, nurses, etc." Many Christian youth participated in this confirmation that the whole Kwangei province lay under Communist control. Still, students from the surrounding area walked as far as eighteen miles to spend Christmas in church.

As the Western year changed to 1950, local officials again promoted parading and dancing in the streets. Local leaders watched approvingly—for the most part; some commented on the lack of hospital staff participation. Again without comment, and perhaps unconscious of it, Irene limned the tension between the "new China" and Christianity. As students paraded and danced, hospital staff began a revival. As hospital staff worried about pay and morphine, compound residents left for military school and service. Local disturbances and occasional aerial bombing revealed the thinness of the veneer of normality. Dr. Ou said that the hospital must send representatives to Communist meetings; people rushed to the compound for safety when planes appeared and "street children" who had been absent from Sunday School for a long time returned by mid-January. A local tea shop owner closed up because of poor business, a fisherman found and accidentally detonated a hand grenade (and spent hours in the hospital's operating room), and security tightened enough that compound residents needed a password. By month's end, hospital representatives were attending Communist meetings and less than a week later graduating a class of student nurses.

At January's end the missionaries entered a fresh phase of uncertainty. It proved to be a world of exit permits (which required two "guaranteers"),

transportation and rumors of transportation, and difficult decisions. Simultaneously, the time-honored practice of using silver as currency on the streets (and often as palm grease) ended officially. A letter promising an evacuation ship set all this in motion, for while it hinted at a choice to go or stay, it implied that eventually all would leave.

As the letter had been emblematic of change, so an early February train story portended things to come. A compound resident (Chinese) had gone to the station to buy a ticket early in the morning for a noon train. At noon, those waiting heard that they couldn't go until the morrow. About suppertime, word came that the train might leave that night. Then contrary word arrived. About 2 PM the next day, word went out that tickets were being sold and that travelers should come to the station. When the resident arrived at 3:45, there were no tickets. The train finally steamed in about 4PM, but it was a train of only boxcars. Despite the accommodations, people rushed on, trying to board as others tried to leave. The resulting confusion convinced one resident, there to see the other off, that she did not want to travel "on this kind of train." Another resident managed to secure passage on "a fairly nice train" the next day, and even had a seat. For the next eight months, one knew that everything one heard about train schedules would be incorrect, including the type of train as well as the schedule. There appeared to be no need to differentiate between passenger and freight trains, for whatever kind appeared carried each. Even when passenger trains appeared, riders often put their luggage in the aisles and sat on it to make the trip, as missionaries Ann and Cliff Harris did just before mid-February.

Adding to the tension was uncertainty about the loyalty of local help. Also in mid-February, two soldiers came and confiscated passes because of a servant's complaint, then returned to question more staff—an on-going process. And the process became more and more official, with forms and prepared sets of questions to be answered. While the incident seemed to blow over, it proved disheartening and merely enhanced the sense that all was "confusion as usual." Soldiers came into the compound at will, sometimes questioning, sometimes playing sports, sometimes (and unnervingly) merely appearing silently and watching. Lack of reliable information only increased the tension. Two days before the Year of the Tiger arrived, a street demonstration (complete with torches and drums)

surged through the town. Although she wasn't sure, Irene thought that perhaps it celebrated the new year. The next day she discovered that instead, it celebrated the signing of a treaty with Russia. The next day, February 17, Kweilin celebrated the new year in appropriate fashion with parading and speech-making and noise, though a man who "was a little drunk" broke up a worship service in the compound. Three days later yet another parade consumed most of the day and into the night. Irene estimated that it took two hours to pass any given point. As to its cause, some laid it to the new provisional government, others to the treaty with Russia.

Despite uncertainty of information and transportation, the mails continued to move with no more than the usual delays. The hospital continued to get shipments of medicines (morphine and streptomycin seemed particularly important). Unfortunately, the mails often brought letters with unsettling news. Stories contrasting official pronouncements of freedom of religion with the reality in places like Nanchang led Irene to confide to her diary that she wished for the work to be done as quickly as possible because "the dark is coming soon." And while they did live in a compound with its walls and gates, the ability of soldiers to come and go at will and the disappearance of a wide variety of items, including blankets, heightened the residents' sense of unease. Nor was news from the radio any better. In mid-March, Irene sadly noted that missionary Selma Maxville in Burma had been captured, rescued, then killed when the rescue party was ambushed.

Not only did misinformation on the part of compound residents cause problems. Misinformation about Christians in general and those in the compound in particular, especially among the Communist soldiers with whom they interacted, heightened tension as well. One soldier inquired into the truth of what he'd heard: that wearing red was a sin for Christians. Another soldier assumed that, to use a term common in China, those who worked in the compound were all "rice Christians," and were surprised when those questioned replied that they were Christians from choice, not because of an employment requirement. But Irene had one ray of good news in mid-March: her certificate saying that she could nurse in Kweilin arrived from the new provisional government, and she

learned that she would not have to take an exam. “Happy day!!” she exclaimed.

Happy days were few and farther and farther between. Food became an issue. And official attention to Christians in general and compound residents in particular increased and regulations tightened. Some locals sold out as fast as possible so as to be able to move quickly if necessary. In late March, they heard that the government had taken over the Luichow church. Locals told stories about government plans for use of mission property. “Sweeps” by soldiers became more common, and what had been desultory searches became much more stringent. A visiting country pastor was not registered and found himself in jail, though (as Irene noted) with much company. Curfews were common; testimony services were curtailed, and hospital personnel found it increasingly difficult to attend worship services. At one point, Irene postulated that the Communists wanted to find out about hospital finances (and a few days later returned “trying to get us to buy bonds,” to which the missionaries responded with the apology that they hadn’t “any money for this”). The hospital seemed a particular focus for the Communists, so much so that Irene noted that “their liberty is almost all gone.” Just as “little Communists” in Bible school classes had begun to give “very ‘modern’ answers” to theological questions (in one case responding to “why Jesus came into the world” with “to eat”), so even nursing students reacted to the missionaries’ loss of authority, cleaning up after themselves less and not being as prompt as before. And the Communists even began to impinge on nursing classes, requiring acupuncture classes by late March. Irene confessed to her diary that she vehemently complained of the danger from the needles, opposed the classes, and tried to get them stopped (to no avail).

The feeling of constriction heightened as March closed. Anonymous letters began to appear inside the compound criticizing Bible schools and their workers. The amount collected in routine and special offerings alike declined. Thefts continued (including their “good sewing machine”), and compound residents learned that missionaries in other Chinese stations had reported the same problem. The missionaries had their precious metals, particularly gold, cast into rings for portability and safekeeping. Local Christians upon whom compound residents had relied

spent more and more time incarcerated (“in the ‘jug,’” as Irene occasionally styled it). Intra-compound tensions heightened, and previously ignored regional enmities (especially north versus south) tended to surface. Underlying it all lay the beat of what Irene took to calling the “devil drums” and the increasing realization that liberation was for them no liberation at all. By early April, Irene consistently used quotation marks around the word in her diary.

The ever-heightening tension was not without its bright spots. The police at least investigated thefts (however ineffectually; in the sewing machine case, they notified the missionaries that they had found it, but the one they found proved not to be the missing one; Irene never recorded any police success with any such undertaking, though she was given to proclaiming every good event to her diary). When the carpentry shop burned in early April despite the best efforts of a compound bucket brigade, Irene noted with satisfaction that this ended the doctors’ practice of smoking indoors—a practice probably responsible for the fire. Since February, Irene had been using gardening as a diversion, and its delights increasingly made their way into the diary; planting corn, beans, musk melons, and tomatoes thrilled her. And having plenty of noodles to eat in the early spring gladdened everyone’s heart. But the brightest spots remained redemption stories of compound residents who had been caught up in Communist successes, left the Lord’s work, then returned. Sometimes those redemption stories lay only in missionary perceptions. Irene praised the Lord when she discovered that the Communist newspaper editor was a “fellowship boy” who had left school when the Communists arrived but who carefully screened the missionaries from adverse publicity. But the shining stars in the darkness remained the reclamation of the lost. One boy, caught up in the changing times, had discarded old friends and ways for new. He took to smoking, playing cards, blaspheming, and talking others into not believing. After about five months of this, he returned, admitted that pride had been his downfall, confessed, and requested readmission; the prodigal returned.

The provisional government’s week-long spring vaccination drive and the chance to practice her craft joined the mail’s arrival with a new *Reader’s Digest* in providing occupation for her mind and body. Irene rejoiced in news of a Shanghai revival, and even in an opportunity to pass out booklets

explaining evolution. Perhaps the coming of spring helped everyone's frame of mind. By mid-April it had turned hot and humid, with a week of rain, but the opportunity to get out and shop for the first time since "liberation" certainly made up for that. Concern for hospital finances, though still present, receded into the background. Most of Irene's diary entries reflected the off-again, on-again problems of life in uncertain times—problems of unreliable water and friends torn between faith and ambition.

A new authoritarian ideology's xenophobic attitudes toward Westerners in general and capitalists in particular exacerbated the tension despite the rays of sunshine. By late April, the Communists had instituted self-criticism meetings at the hospital, which Irene found very unscriptural and full of criticizing others. On multiple occasions students left, shouting that the "world was made by labor." Testimony meetings, which had been a backbone of religious expression for the missions, lengthened (one on April's last day lasted just shy of two hours) but also on occasion turned ugly. At one on May Day, one of the Chinese told of "hating us and wanting us to leave," which reduced Irene (if not others) to tears. The missionaries were buoyed by the appearance of charismatic elements, including physical movement occasioned by the Holy Spirit's prompting, by the occasional soldier who attended meetings, and even moreso by those who prayed, and by expressions of respect and appreciation for the missionary's work.

By mid-May, more and more messages were negative. Boys increasingly refused to attend meetings, Bible School students were "mostly too scared to give testimony," and in one instance a group of soldiers entered the compound with a man who they said had run away and beat him mercilessly. The missionaries heard shots in the night, and hospital occupancy dropped from about fifty to a low of seventeen patients. Officials controlled and closely monitored movement about the town, including how long individuals were allowed to be in any particular place. Perhaps most tellingly, missionaries wanted students to pray for God's work there "but they were busy praying for themselves." Mail and shipments gave evidence of having been opened, and boarders were trying to leave "as soon as possible." Train travel became a topic of diary conversation again, and with more intensity. And even as they did "all in

their power to retain their freedom of religion,” a Chinese pastor in late May confessed to being afraid to witness on the train until someone who had heard him preach in Linchow called him pastor. Hospital occupancy dipped a little lower, and continued low voltage made operating the radio and getting news impossible.

In early June, officials expected nurses to help with the week-long cholera inoculation drive, which they did gladly. More reliable electrical service allowed for some radio operation, and about a third of the way through the month compound residents finally heard some news for the first time in over a month. Most of what they discovered that was useful came from infrequent travelers who told stories of Christians in other provinces. In Shantung, for example, Christians were kept separated and not allowed to fellowship. At the University of Henan there, small groups of students summoned Christians before them for interrogation. Anecdotes about trials, successes, and failures abounded. One student faced the choice between keeping her high exam grade (80) and renouncing Christianity or remaining faithful and losing twenty points. Another student refused to join the Young Communists and was given a sheaf of questions about her faith to answer; still another had to choose between apostasy and expulsion. By June’s end, the new government had added questions about its principles to all school exams. Locals and missionaries alike wondered what that might bring.

The immediate news startled compound residents. Revival had broken out in Shanghai, with improved relations irrespective of status (student/teacher) or geography (northerners/southerners) and confessions of sins (false diplomas, stolen books). Nurses helped with typhoid shots, and in a Friday chapel service which focused on cooperation between church and hospital, speakers noted that internal unity overcomes external difficulties. At the end, the local hospital administrator got off-message and “said he didn't see anything wrong w/Communism—only that they didn't believe in God but that in a few years most of them would believe.” Sadly that premise went untested for the missionaries. On June 27, Irene told her diary that yesterday they had heard that South Korea was headed north (the Communist version). The next day the news reported that the North was marching South, “which makes more sense but looks serious,” and that the “United Nations has taken action.”



News from Korea changed everything. Although hospital operations and injections in the streets continued and rains came to cool the days, rumors abounded. "There are enough rumors around to fill a newspaper," Irene diaried, "especially concerning Kwangsi, probably none of them true!" But on July 11, a "breathtaking" letter came from the district missionary supervisor saying that he had applied for exit permits. Irene confessed to having great peace about leaving, "so different from May of last year." She set her face away from China and prepared to depart. That same day she sat, read through old letters, and threw them away. A planning conference three days later languished as no one felt any enthusiasm and there was a "bad spirit all the way around," though they finally produced what was necessary. One of her fellow missionaries cried for a week.

On Tuesday, July 25, they hoped to have exit permits by Saturday, which they learned "is to be Anti-American Day." Letters brought news of similar plans by other missionaries, and on a visit to "English ladies" at a nearby hospital, Irene learned that they hoped to leave on the morrow (though they lacked permits). The three nurse missionaries continued to talk about leaving, with Irene pressing to make plans and one of her comrades vacillating about leaving and considering staying or even transferring to another mission. Officials postponed the Red Army Day demonstration and parade even as they reportedly laughed at President Truman for calling for a national day of prayer.

August 1 witnessed a huge meeting and torchlight parade in the evening; Irene read old magazines "which need to be thrown away." The three missionary nurses had put their exit permits on hold while they talked about leaving. Irene, who had long before made her own decision, fretted that she felt "time is short and we should be making application for exit permits." One of them "just won't make a decision and I get more and more nervous." As the uncertain one came around, the other vacillated. On the fifth, Irene worried that they couldn't apply for permits until the following week; two days later they couldn't apply "because some things still not planned." She began giving copies of *Streams in the Desert* (devotional book) to those special friends from whom she was about to part, even as she told the hospital administrator of their plans to leave and arranged for a letter from him for the exit permit. The next day officers

came to get information for their applications and, despite concern about dealing with the officials, she confessed that “I sure do feel better now that something is being done.” She and friends took a nostalgic walk to a nearby lotus pond, only to learn of an upsetting change in plans when they returned. Five days later she called a meeting of the nurses she supervised to tell them that she was leaving. She cried the whole time, she confessed to her diary, and a little girl with whom she had played a great deal and for whom she had cared on numerous occasions called her “Mama,” which only made matters worse. When she met the next day with head nurses to plan for her departure, she discovered that those from the north were interested in their travel money so that they could return home.

Irene’s goodbyes intensified on her birthday, August 18, and she and friends undertook nostalgic activities like a boat ride down the river past the Elephant’s Nose, a visit to the Ming tombs, and a cave walk. Most significant was instruction from one of the Chinese doctors “about what to say about New China.” Her weakness for headaches manifest itself greatly as the presumed time to leave neared. A week after her birthday, police still had no word about their exit permits. Ten days after her birthday, she cleaned out her desk. August ended without word of the permits.

When September came, she finished Christmas cards and wrapping presents for the workers. By the end of the first week in September, she was “hoping each day for permit.” Perhaps it was merely the perspective of one departing, but she finally decided that “Things look like they are working out” and she felt “very satisfied.” By mid-September, it became apparent that about a dozen of those they knew were leaving. On the twenty-third, she marked her three-year anniversary in China, and two days later the end of her second year in Kweilin. She and friends went out to eat, the “first time we had been out for any fun for some time.” She passed the time in more sight-seeing and reading, finishing *The Gauntlet* on the twenty-sixth as others celebrated the Moon Festival. Word came of revivals and deprivation, of mountain Christians living on grass and roots for months. Internal mission squabbles over money and work counterpoised parading and drumming on October 1. Pictures, banners, red hammers, and floats (one of a girl in white representing peace and another of a train engine) paraded through the streets and passed right in

front of the hospital in honor of some occasion about which Irene never bothered to discover. Still there were no permits, but Chinese mission leaders had written Hankow about the lack.

In mid-October, Irene told her diary that an official had visited the mission's Chinese leaders to discuss the government's interest in "borrowing" the church and other buildings, to which the leaders asked why he thought that Christianity would disappear since Christian churches were flourishing. Shortly after that compound residents heard one reason for the official line on Christianity; a Chinese Christian was being accused of having "too close a relationship" with the mission. Despite that pressure, the government issued no exit permits.

Finally, on October 24, officials called to say that the long-awaited permits had arrived. While her two missionary nurse colleagues dithered over a last-minute quandary about whether to go or stay, Irene got everything in order and her steamer trunk mostly packed. Rumor proclaimed that the accused Christian had turned apostate, a reality one compound resident laid to his girlfriend. And the police appeared the next day to say that the ditherers "couldn't change their minds now." A steady stream of visitors impeded packing, but those leaving persisted in hopes that officers would come investigate and approve the packed luggage. On the 26th, Irene expected to leave Kweilin on the morrow's 6 PM train. If she did, it would be a departure from the norm expressed in the diary. But she may have been absolutely correct. She never said. A month and a day later, she picked up her diary again—unpacking at home half a world away.