

# Chone District Mission (1934–1936)

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## MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

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The Chone District Mission was a short-term sub-entity of the Northwest China Union Mission. Its territory spanned the southeast portion of Qinghai province and the southwest portion of Gansu province, a very mountainous and picturesque district through which flowed the Taohe River. The population was composed of Han Chinese, Muslims, and Tibetans who had migrated north into China. The Tibetans were known as Chone (otherwise Cone, Choni, Zhuoni Xian, or Jonê). Local Chinese called them Sangemao, meaning “three bundles of hair” because it was the custom for the women to wear their hair in three thick plaits.<sup>1</sup>

Two Tibetans were baptized in 1933 in Sichuan province, giving rise to the hope that these converts would form the nucleus of a mission into Tibet, a territory not yet entered by Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>2</sup> Some Tibetan students entered the China Training Institute soon after and the rallying cry was heard, “On to Lhasa,” the slogan intended to herald graduates crossing the formidable snowy mountains to reach the capital of Tibet.<sup>3</sup> This enthusiasm was mirrored in the ill-fated enterprise to establish a mission station among the Tibetans of the Chone district in the northeastern part of Tibet.

The initiative to enter Chone began at Lanzhou, headquarters of the Kansu (or Gansu) Mission in the Northwest China Union Mission. In May 1933 Elders James Harold Shultz and Chen Dz-shin (or Wu Zeshan), located in the Kansu Mission, answered the invitation of Tibetan officials to visit Chone and Labrang to discuss the establishment of a mission in their community. The trip took them south into the Taohe River valley where several possible sites were explored. The Tibetans freely offered places for a chapel and dispensary to be located.<sup>4</sup>

The bond of trust that was formed between the Tibetan leaders and church officials resulted in the appointment of James Harold Schultz and his wife, Dorothy, to begin work in the heart of Chone. Definite plans were laid in late 1933 to launch the enterprise. The reason for making the strenuous journey from Lanzhou by mule-train in the middle of winter, January 1934, was incomprehensible. They took with them their three children, all under the age of three. The weather was bitterly cold. The local people had only meagre food supplies for winter, therefore James was unable to supplement his own supplies. He had insufficient building materials to complete their cottage, so it proved to be drafty. Their two heaters were inadequate in the frosty weather, and their bed

was damaged beyond repair in transit, so they were forced to sleep on the floor.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the extreme privations, Dorothy somehow found time to conduct a clinic with very limited medical supplies and technical knowledge. James applied himself to learning the local Tibetan dialect. As a temporary measure, they used their own living quarters as a meeting place for a Sabbath School attended by approximately 50 people, both Tibetans and Chinese.<sup>6</sup>

Samuel Tsai (Cài Shūshēn) and his wife went to Chone as assistants, she conducting a tiny elementary school. Elder Tsai was to help Harold with evangelism. Rather than suffer the winter of 1934-1935, the Shultz family retreated back to headquarters at Lanzhou late in October 1934.<sup>8</sup> They returned to Chone in 1935 and endured the winter of 1935-1936, at which time the national assistants took a break in Lanzhou.<sup>9</sup>

In late February and early March 1936, a small party of church officials, including Elder Clarence Crisler, visited the Panchen Lama in Xining, Qinghai province, receiving a favorable reception as they discussed further mission efforts among the Tibetans. When they returned to Lanzhou they united with the national assistants and set out on mules to visit the Shultz family further south in Chone. The mountain tracks were covered with snow and ice, making it a strenuous journey. Elder Crisler was ill. The party remained in Chone for one day only and then hastened away, hoping to reach medical help for him in Lanzhou. Tragically, he died of pneumonia on the way.<sup>10</sup>

Crisler's death underscored the perils of conducting a mission station in such dreadful circumstances. The taste for risky pioneering turned bitter and the Chone Mission was terminated. Furthermore, James and Dorothy had increased their family to five, four sons and a daughter all under the age of five.<sup>11</sup> Their further efforts in the austerity of Chone were not advisable. Instead, they relocated to work in the Tibetan community at Xining.<sup>12</sup>

With the closure of the Chone Mission in 1936 the rallying cry "On to Lhasa" was not entirely muted. It continued to be heralded in 1937 when quantities of Tibetan literature were distributed to the provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan.<sup>13</sup> During 1938 and 1939, Wang Yung Seng, a converted Buddhist monk from Choni who had attended the China Training Institute, made the dangerous return trip to Lhasa as a colporteur.<sup>14</sup>

From his headquarters in Xining, James Shultz visited Choni again. In late 1940 he organized the construction of an elementary school and a dispensary. Classes began at Choni for a small group of students under the direction of Yu Tuen T'ien.<sup>15</sup> However, financial backing collapsed for initiatives like this when expatriates fled China during the Second World War. Later, continued mission efforts were made on behalf of the Tibetans.<sup>16</sup>

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