



Bai Jinjian and Zeng Xiangfu reached Tihwa capital of Xinjiang in 1931.

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Bai, Jinjian and Zeng Xiangfu

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The story of two Chinese colporteurs, Beh Chin-chien (白锦坚, Bai Jinjian) and Djeng Hsiang-pu (曾祥孚, Zeng Xiangfu), is one of Christian courage pitted against the inclement weather of western China and the difficulties of taking the gospel to Moslem Uyghers in Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, the largest province of China on its northwest border. It is also the story of their ultimate sacrifice for their belief in the gospel commission of Christ.

Prior to 1931

Bai Jinjian () was a second generation Seventh-day Adventist, born in the central Chinese province of Henan where he worked as a colporteur after studying at Honan (now Henan) Junior Middle School. About 1930 he volunteered to pioneer mission work in Xinjiang, the most westerly Chinese province. A large proportion of the population in Xinjiang were Uyghur people of the Moslem faith. Bai needed a traveling companion, one driven by the conviction that Christianity should be offered to everyone. A man of this calibre, Zeng Xiangfu (), stepped forward to adopt the dangerous venture. Zeng was born in the southern province of Hunan and for five years had ministered diligently in the Hunan Mission. In 1929 he was the most successful soul-winner in his mission territory.¹

After Zeng heard about the call to open up the work in Xinjiang, he wrote to Elder E. L. Longway, and said, "I would like to respond to the call to go to Xinjiang, because my experience of working as a colporteur in southwest Hunan had prepared me well. I am now able to sleep at roadsides instead of going to a hotel, drink water from small streams, and feed on dried food from my backpack." The Central China Union Mission Board was delighted to have these two courageous young men, Bai and Zeng, who were willing to take up the challenge to open up the work in China's northwest.²

The Two-Year Expedition That Never Finished

In February 1931 Bai and Zeng set out on horseback, traveling northwest from Hankow (now Wuhan) in the Hubei province, making their way through Henan and Shaanxi provinces to Lanchoufu (now Lanzhou) in eastern Gansu province. While crossing a flooded river, one of the men lost his horse and all his belongings, narrowly escaping with his life.³ The venture was planned as a two-year round trip. Supplies of literature were despatched ahead of them and were waiting to be claimed when they arrived. They had much success in Lanzhou, selling *Hope of the World* and *Health and Longevity*.

During the first part of their journey in eastern Gansu, their experience was relatively peaceful, though not without incident. Once they were in Píngliáng (), they were arrested by soldiers of the local militia, who brought them to their commander, thinking that they were spies of an opposing army. Having observed that they were honest citizens who carried no suspicious material, the commander not only released them immediately but also gave them \$100 to show his support of their work.⁴

Their ultimate aim was to reach Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, or East Turkestan. They found a western route through Qinghai province and the western end of Gansu province, but the roads beyond were impassable, and they turned back to Lanzhou where they purchased Bactrian camels for a second attempt.⁵ No Seventh-day Adventist missionary had previously traveled beyond Lanzhou.⁶ Their distribution of literature was the means of winning some converts in western Gansu province.⁷

Taking a more northerly path through western Mongolia on their second attempt, they managed to enter Xinjiang. In the capital, Urumqi, they had more success with many sales. Leaving Urumqi, they rode southwest to Tihwa where, a short distance further on, there was a fork in the road. Zeng continued alone in a southwestern direction and reached Kashgar, the most westerly city in China. Bai took the northeast road to Ili Prefecture and reached the border of China at Tacheng. When they reunited back at Tihwa, they converted their considerable amount of cash into animal skins and other merchandise, together with six pack horses, all of which they hoped to sell when they returned home.⁸ Having accomplished their goal, they began the homeward journey. In their last report, at the end of January 1933, they said they had reached Hami (now Kumul), Xinjiang province, but they were still in Moslem territory. It was the last communication received from them.⁹

Speculation about the fate of the two men persisted. Were they killed by bandits? Did they choose to return via the Mongolian route and perish in the Gobi Desert? Or did they die in the massacre of Christian Chinese at Hami in February 1933, an atrocity ordered by the local Moslem leader?¹⁰ The exact circumstances may never be known. The Hami massacre, in which 1,700 Han Chinese lost their lives, took place two days after they returned to Hami and remains the most likely tragic scenario. Two years later there arrived at the Shanghai Seventh-day Adventist headquarters a box of dried fruit from Xinjiang which bore the handwriting of Bai and Zeng with the words, "First fruits of Xinjiang." No one at the head office had the courage to taste the fruit from that parcel!¹¹

Ten years after Bai and Zeng started on their epic journey, mission officials arranged for the building of a church at Kiuchwan (now Jinquan) in western Gansu province, a memorial to the inspirational zeal and loyalty they demonstrated for their faith.¹²

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NOTES

1. Ezra L. Longway, "A Memorial to Two Brave Men," *China Division Reporter*, March 1941, 12-13.
2. Binren Shen, "Zeng Xiangfu and Bai Jinjian," in *Chinese SDA History*, Samuel Young (editor) (Hongkong, China: Chinese Union Mission, 2002), 689; Ezra L. Longway, *Dangerous Opportunity* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974).
3. Harry H. Hall, "Unheard of for Eight Months," *ARH*, November 16, 1933, 18.
4. Binren Shen, "Zeng Xiangfu and Bai Jinjian," in *Chinese SDA History*, Samuel Young (editor) (Hongkong, China: Chinese Union Mission, 2002), 690.
5. Ezra L. Longway, "Far Away Sinkiang," *China Division Reporter*, May 1932, 3.
6. Nathan F. Brewer, "Central China Union-1929: A Survey," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, May 1930, 4.
7. Harry W. Miller, "China's Great Northwest," *ARH*, January 18, 1934, 12-13.
8. Ezra L. Longway, "China Mission Pioneer Sketches," *China Division Reporter*, June 1, 1940, 3-5.
9. Harry W. Miller, "China's Great Northwest," *ARH*, January 18, 1934, 12-13.
10. John Oss, "The China Division Publishing Department," *China Division Reporter*, April 1934, 21.
11. Binren Shen, "Zeng Xiangfu and Bai Jinjian," in *Chinese SDA History*, Samuel Young (editor) (Hongkong, China: Chinese Union Mission, 2002), 691.
12. Ezra L. Longway, "A Memorial to Two Brave Men," *China Division Reporter*, March 1941, 12-13.

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