Christianity Encountering Chinese Folk Religion and Buddhism

Asbjørn Aavik's *Dalen*

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Abstract: Asbjørn Aavik's prize-winning missionary novel of 1949, *Dalen*, offered readers detailed glimpses into both polytheistic Chinese folk religion and popular Buddhism during the late nineteenth century when the Norwegian Lutheran Mission was gaining footholds in central China. The obvious purpose of the text is to bolster the conventional justification of missionary endeavours in that country. Aavik's rhetorical strategy is based on a binary juxtaposition of deeply ingrained Chinese religious beliefs, fears, and practices on the one hand and the liberating spirit of Christianity, especially the proclamation of God's unmerited grace, on the other.

Keywords: Asbjørn Aavik, *Dalen*, Norwegian Lutheran Mission, China, Buddhism, Chinese folk religion.

Sammenfatning: Asbjørn Aaviks prisbelønte misjonsroman fra 1949, Dalen, ga leserne detaljerte glimt av både polyteistisk kinesisk folkereligion og populærbuddhisme på slutten av 1800-tallet da Norsk Luthersk Misjon fikk fotfeste sentralt i Kina. Det åpenbare formålet med teksten er å styrke den konvensjonelle rettferdiggjørelsen av misjonsarbeid i det landet. Aaviks retoriske strategi er basert på en binær sammenstilling av dypt inngrodde kinesiske religiøse overbevisninger, frykt og praksis på den ene siden og kristendommens frigjørende ånd, spesielt forkynnelsen av Guds ufortjente nåde, på den andre siden.

Keywords: Asbjørn Aavik, *Dalen*, Norsk Luthersk Misjon, Kina, buddhisme, kinesisk folkereligion.

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Introduction

The subgenre of international missionary fiction set in China grew notably during the first half of the twentieth century, owing not least to the internationally heralded efforts of Pearl S. Buck. The daughter of Southern Presbyterian missionaries from the United States of America, she was raised bilingually in the province of Jiangsu and, after completing her undergraduate studies in her parents' homeland, returned to China as an educational missionary. Eventually Buck became severely critical of the missionary personnel whom she knew in that country and, after questioning the need for further evangelisation in the Middle Kingdom, resigned her position. Before doing so, however, she had launched her literary career with such novels as *East Wind – West Wind* and *The Good Earth*, works which led to her reception of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. Her sister Grace, writing under the pseudonym Cornelia Spencer, followed in her wake, writing *The Missionary* (1947) and other fictional and nonfictional works set in China. Later works by or about missionaries in the Chinese field included *inter alia* John Hersey's acclaimed *The Call* (1985) and Bo Caldwell's *City of Tranquil Light* (2010).

Within the realm of Norwegian missionary fiction, men who propagated the Gospel in China contributed works dealing with that country at several points both before and after they were compelled to leave it following the ascent of the Communist Party to power in October 1949. Among these amateur *littérateurs* were Racin Kolnes, Per Bredvei, and Asbjørn Aavik. To be sure, none of them gained a visible place in the pantheon of the nation's literary history. Nevertheless, collectively their *œuvre* is quantitatively significant, and some of their novels from the middle decades of the twentieth century merit re-reading today. As literary art, they vary greatly in quality. Regardless of their shortcomings, these fictional reconstructions of daily life in China and its encounter with Christianity as transmitted to its chiefly rural population by missionaries from Norway comprise a valuable source for investigating that dimension of Christian history in East Asia. They offer lucid if unabashedly biassed, in-house interpretations which arguably reveal as much about the strength of their authors' commitment to the propagation of the Gospel as they do about traditional, indigenous matters in China.

Some of their efforts with the creative pen were widely distributed in Norway and translated into other languages. Most, however, have remained invisible to potential readers outside the Nordic countries. Furthermore, scholarly analysis of this subset of modern Scandinavian literature has lagged far behind its popularity in Norway.[2] In the present article, I shall seek to address this neglect by exploring central motifs in one novel, *Dalen,* by Asbjørn Aavik, which was deemed the best missionary novel in a pan-Scandinavian competition in 1948. In brief, these are the negative portrayal of

2 One prominent exception is Frederick Hale, *A Swedish Pen Against Apartheid: The South African Novels of Gunnar Helander* (Cape Town: African Renaissance Press, 2001).

Chinese society as tradition-bound but in dire need of fundamental change, the fearful captivity of large numbers of the Chinese peasantry to local and other deities who they believe exercise control over their lives and therefore must be propitiated through worship and sacrifices, and the advent of a simple Christian gospel of love, healing, and unmerited grace in a society where that message was in woefully short supply. It is argued that Aavik, representing a theologically very conservative missionary agency, perceived the Christianity which he propagated in China and both Buddhism and traditional folk religion as he encountered them in that country as entirely incompatible components of a binary framework. This exclusivist mindset determined the unflinching thematic content of *Dalen* and undoubtedly contributed to its acceptance and popularity among like-minded readers in Norway.

Dalen is anything but a cheerful read providing readers a glimpse into a quaint, exotic, and appealing land on the other side of the globe. In Aavik's narrative, death constantly stalks the characters and frequently strikes them down, in some cases inflicting miserable, fatal illness on them. Neither local deities nor those of national repute are portrayed as effective agents against this perpetual suffering. Indeed, many of the gods in Chinese folk religion are capricious spiritual entities that deploy rather than slay the dragons of disease, avalanches, drowning, and other woes. For many people, therefore, fear thus lurks immediately beneath the surface of daily life. This broad characterisation, of course, is part of Aavik's rhetorical strategy for highlighting the alterity of such polytheism as it is woven into the cultural warp and weft of the Middle Kingdom and contrasting it with the benevolence of God as revealed in the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Missionary fiction is not a uniform genre but one encompassing a relatively broad spectrum of *inter alia* perspectives and purposes. Novels that fall within it can be written by missionaries or other people, some of whom do not veil their hostility to the way Christianity has been propagated across cultural lines. Furthermore, the works in question can be contemporary or retrospective. Many are published by houses that do not have a stake in the missionary enterprise, while others are issued by agencies that commission personnel to sow the Gospel in foreign parts. In the latter case, this kind of literature has tended to serve promotional interests of the organisations in question, and that can profoundly influence thematic content. Such is unambiguously the case with Aavik's *Dalen*.

In a frequently referenced article published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jamie S. Scott plotted historical trends in Protestant fiction about missions, including a broad though far from universal shift away from enthusiastic endorsement of the missionary enterprise generally in the twentieth century. He noted, "Occasionally, a writer of this era expresses ambivalence about Christian complicity with Western expansionism." Focussing on Anglophone texts, Scott generalised that "between World Wars I and II this skepticism increases, and critical portrayals of

Protestant missions and missionaries begin to outnumber sympathetic depictions."[3] As will be seen presently, however, this generalisation does not apply to the missionary Aavik's in-house fictional portrayal of Lutheran orthodoxy with non-Christian religious beliefs and practices in China.

To understand the place of Aavik's fiction in the context of Norwegian missions history, one must be aware that the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (Norsk Luthersk Misjonssamband, or NLM) which sent him to China in 1928 was firmly anchored on the "orthodox" side of the ongoing theological strife that burdened Lutheranism in Norway during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Its principal founder and long-term secretary, Johannes Brandtzæg, was involved in the adoption of a stance taken by numerous theologically conservative Christian organisations at the famous Calmeyergaten meeting in Oslo in January 1920, which disavowed co-operation with all agencies that were regarded as doctrinally questionable.[4] In accordance with this position, the NLM did not even participate in the formation of either the Union Lutheran Theological Seminary at Shekou in 1910 or the Lutheran Church of China in 1920.[5] This contrasted with the involvement of the Norway's other Lutheran agency which had a large field in China between the two world wars, namely the Norwegian Missionary Society.[6]

Also relevant to a historically contextualised consideration of *Dalen* is the fact that as an uncompromisingly conservative agency the NLM was entirely at odds with a trend in *some* Protestant missionary circles (chiefly those into which liberal theology had made inroads) which had begun to gain momentum shortly before Aavik's arrival in China in 1928, namely the recognition of non-Christian religions as valid spiritual paths. In the history of missionary thought and practice in the twentieth century, this development led to the publication in 1932 of the renowned but controversial report, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years*.[7] To the NLM personnel, acknowledging such validity contradicted their commitment to Christianity as the sole path to eternal salvation.

3 Jamie S. Scott, "Missions and Fiction" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, no. 3 (July 2008), 122.

4 Johannes Brandtzæg, "Landsmøtet" in *Kineseren* 30, no. 5 (1 February 1920), 39.

5 Andrew Hsiao, *A Brief History of the Chinese Lutheran Church* (Hong Kong: Toasheng Publishing House, 1999), 13-14.

6 Silje Dragsund Aase, "Negotiating Church in China's Red Province: A Lutheran Church in Hunan 1902-1951" (Doctor of Philosophy thesis, VID Specialized University, 2022), 75-76, 117-119.

7 William Ernest Hocking, *et al*., *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1932).

Asbjørn Aavik: A Biographical Summary

Aavik began his career as a novelist during a transitional period in Norwegian literary history, *i.e.* shortly after the end of the Second World War when the old guard was fading from the scene. The Nobel laureates Sigrid Undset and Knut Hamsun died in 1946 and 1950, respectively. Such other giants as Johan Falkberget, Sigurd Hoel, and Gabriel Scott were in the twilight of their productivity as creators of fiction. Tarjei Vesaas and Johan Borgen had begun their dominance.

Aavik was born in 1902 at Åvik in what was then Spangereid but is now within the municipality of Lindesnes south of Mandal. His original surname was "Ulriksen"; not until the 1930s did he begin to call himself after the village of his birth. The son of a fisherman and navigation instructor, he attended a Christian school in Birkeland before continuing his education at the training institution of the NLM at Fjellhaug near Oslo in the 1920s. His studies there ended in December 1926 while the protracted theological strife within the Church of Norway known as *kirkestriden* was still raging.[8] Aavik then worked for the NLM's Skien district in southern Norway for approximately a year and a half, following a conventional pattern of acquiring ministerial experience and becoming familiar to at least some of the people on the home front who would contribute financially to his support before proceeding to China.[9] In May 1928 it was announced in the NLM's periodical, *Kineseren*, that Aavik was one of nearly a dozen candidates who would be sent to China via Siberia four months later.[10]

Aavik's description of his journey to central China highlighted not only the cultural and physical distance of his destination from Norway but also the tribulations which missionaries were then encountering. He and his companions departed East Station in Oslo on 11 September and travelled chiefly via rail to Stockholm, St. Petersburg, and Moscow to Dalian in occupied Manchuria. Their original plan to continue by train from there via Beijing to Hankou proved impossible, as that railway line had been temporarily closed because of unidentified "disturbances". Hence, this small party of Norwegian missionaries booked passage on a Japanese freighter south to Shanghai, where they disembarked on the final day of September. Aavik's first formal service of worship on Chinese soil was in a chapel of the Christian Church in China, a composite denomination which had been established a year earlier through the merger of numerous Protestant missionary churches. The NLM personnel then continued up the Yangtse River on a voyage which Aavik portrayed as a "vacation" compared to the earlier stages of their journey from the Norwegian capital. Most of their fellow passengers were missionaries *en route* back to their stations which had been devastated after the evacuation of most inland posts the previous year. Aavik acknowledged that

8 "Forbundet" in *Kineseren* XXXVI, no. 46-47 (Christmas, 1926), 7.
9 "Forbundets hjemme-arbeid" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 8 (20 February 1927), 3.
10 "Forbundet" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 21 (20 May 1928), 3.

to many people in Norway it may have seemed "strange" to commission personnel to China during that period of great xenophobic unrest, but he found it entirely reasonable because precisely then they were most needed.[11] By the time the party finally reached Laohekou in October, after a stopover in Hankou, where they continued up the Han River, Aavik had fallen ill with an unidentified disease but recovered. They also came nearly face to face with the seemingly endless plague of banditry. The travellers on a boat that was docked next to the one on which these Norwegians had travelled were robbed. In the words of a journalist at *Kineseren*, "Our missionaries escaped with only being frightened."[12] After a stay of several weeks at the NLM's large, well-developed Laohekou station, Aavik was sent to Yunyang in Hubei province.[13]

The initial phase of his evangelistic ministry there, which included intensive language study with a private tutor, was an emotionally challenging time of tribulation which foreshadowed certain themes that cropped up in *Dalen*. Aavik wrote candidly and at length about his mental state in an essay contributed to *Kineseren* summarising his first two years in China. General cultural shock and the alterity of almost everything he saw and experienced nearly overcame this young man in his mid-twenties. The terrain near Yunyang was "so greyish yellow and monotonous" as were the hills and the prairies. Even the rivers were yellow. The houses were grey and sad, and almost no forests were in sight, wherever he looked. This unappealing physical appearance was mild, however, compared with the stark differences separating him from the Chinese people. This, too, appears to have intensified Aavik's homesickness and made him long for companionship with compatriots. "I began to think that no people on God's green earth were more beautiful than my people," he confessed.[14]

Not surprisingly, Aavik's efforts to learn spoken Chinese proved intensely frustrating. "If I had been a small boy," he confessed, "I would have cried in my mother tongue, 'I want to go home to Mother!'" Turning to a readily comprehensible metaphor, Aavik wrote of the language as "a large wall which closed the road to the people – a wall made of granite." There were times when he nearly gave up, but then his courage returned as he understood that there was no alternative to gaining fluency in Chinese if he was to reach its speakers with the Gospel.[15]

Even then, however, Aavik felt the pain of xenophobia, especially among the local "heathens". "To be called a *yang-ren* (foreigner) wherever one goes, or often even a

11 Asbjørn Ulriksen, "Fra Kina-reisen Fra Dairen to Hankou" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 43 (18 November 1928), 2.
12 "Forbundet", in *Kineseren* CCCVIII, no. 46 (9 December 1928), 3.
13 "Litt frå Kina. Reisebrev frå misjonær Lien" in *Kineseren* XXXIX, no. 6 (10 February 1929), 3.
14 "Asbjørn Ulriksen, "Etter vel to år. En ung misjonærs inntrykk" in *Kineseren* XLI, no. 12 (22 March 1931), 1.
15 Ulriksen, "Etter vel to år. En ung misjonærs inntrykk", 1.

yang-gwei (foreign devil) gets to one," he admitted. Such ethnophaulisms went hand-in-hand with what Aavik called "the hard hearts of the people". He recalled how shortly before his departure from Norway in 1928 one older missionary had cautioned him, "The heathens whom we won for the Gospel were like stones hacked out of a mountain." At the time Aavik optimistically believed that was an exaggeration, but two years in Hubei had disabused him of that assumption.[16]

The waves of banditry that continued to wash over the mission fields in the early 1930s also troubled Aavik immensely. In May 1932 he reported at length on how he had temporarily left Yunyang to place his small family in the relative security of Nanyang. Returning to Yunyang in March, he, an accompanying evangelist, and two porters had passed through many devastated villages, some of which had burned to the ground. "Outside many doors there was still fresh blood or people who had been murdered," Aavik wrote, adding that a fully realistic description would be impossible for some readers of the NLM periodical to stomach. He also painted a memorably graphic picture of the bandits' reign of terror. They had generally demanded to be fed, and refusing to comply could be lethal. As Aavik wrote, he could hear a solo trumpet playing execution music accompanying five bound young farmers who had refused to the place where they would be shot. This missionary's only consolation lay in a perceived willingness of more Chinese to take him seriously when he preached that the violence was God's "scourge" because "all of His goodness has only hardened you" and the time for humility before Him was at hand. His evangelist had concurred and assured him that people were becoming receptive to their testimony.[17]

Aavik apparently overcame some of his emotional and attitudinal growing pains as a neophyte missionary, but his reports and letters from Hubei underscore his ongoing frustration in what he perceived as the culture-bound obstinacy of the Chinese whom he was seeking to evangelise. They also testify to his commitment to his calling. In late 1932, for example, he reported from the outstation where he and his wife were living that elderly villagers had made the concept of "heathendom" more comprehensible to him. As a child, Aavik recalled, his mother had implored him to pray for the "heathens", about whom and their "dark night" (a term he remembered hearing frequently as a child near Mandal) he then understood nothing. He described an elderly couple who resided in a modest house near his own earthen abode. The man, then nearly blind, assured him that he was ready to die. Aavik suggested that he prepare for that transition, but the unnamed Chinese merely assured him that he had not stolen, murdered, or committed other offences and therefore would leave this world an "honourable man". To the young missionary, this attitude was typical for elderly "heathens" who had an inadequate concept of sin as merely immoral actions. "His thinking did not extend further than his field," Aavik wrote of this old farmer. His

16 Ulriksen, "Etter vel to år. En ung misjonærs inntrykk", 1.
17 Asbjørn Ulriksen, "Yünyang-brev" in *Kineseren* XL, no. 28 (24 July 1932), 2.

efforts to explain and cajole failed to bear any perceptible fruit. The Chinese neighbour merely unmoved, other than to show his foreign visitor the solid wooden casket in which he would be buried and which already held his neatly folded burial attire. Aavik declared to readers in Norway that elderly Chinese were nearly all the same in their impermeability to the Gospel. He alluded to (but did not identify) Ephesians 2:12 to describe their spiritual condition: "Without hope and without God in the world." Aavik noted, however, that China was full of gods, not only in the ubiquitous temples but also in houses, where the walls were covered with deities.

Aavik's First Full-length Novel

After leaving war-torn China and returning to liberated Norway in 1946, Aavik resumed the literary side of his ministry while continuing to serve the NLM domestically. In 1948 he responded to a competition for missionary novels written in the Nordic countries by submitting the manuscript which was published the following year as *Dalen*. It was among the ten Norwegian entries in an international field of thirty-nine. The other texts were from the pens of Swedish, Finnish, and Danish novelists.[18]

The geographical scope of the competition was virtually unlimited; how many of the texts dealt with China is unknown. At any rate, Aavik wrote his consciously at a critical juncture of that country's political history. After co-operating with its bitter rivals, Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist (or *Kuomintang*) forces in an alliance of convenience against the Japanese occupation of China, the communist insurgents under the leadership of Mao Zedong resumed their quest to overthrow the government and overturn Chinese society in favour of a Marxist state modelled to a great degree on the Soviet Union. After finally occupying Beijing, Mao and his cadres proclaimed the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949. Several months before that pivotal day, however, it was apparent to Aavik that the communist victory would soon be a *fait accompli*. He contributed to the NLM's magazine, *Utsyn* (Panorama), a lengthy article about Mao titled "Chinas nye sterke mann" (China's New Strongman) in which he sought to help readers understand this revolutionary who would soon make a profound impact on the endeavours of foreign missionary organisations.

However, at that time Aavik did not betray a fatalistic attitude about the future of Christianity in China. He stated explicitly in this article that while his rival Chiang was "a Christian personality", Mao was an "individualist not rooted in any religion". Rather, he "swears by Marxism and by his own fist, which always lies atop a stack of papers on the negotiating table". What this secular and intrinsically anti-religious attitude boded for the churches in the Middle Kingdom Aavik declined to guess.

18 "Nordmannen vant prisen" in *Nordlands Framtid* (Bodø), 7 April 1949, 6; "En prisbelønnet misjonsroman" in *Utsyn* LIX, no. 12 (24 April 1949), 4.

"What the conditions will be in the new China, nobody knows," he conceded, adding feebly that it would be exciting to follow the course of events.[19]

Aavik did not explicitly challenge wholesale Mao's as yet murky plans for the restructuring of Chinese society. However, his opposition to the thoroughgoing land tenure reforms that lay at the heart of the communist platform was entirely in harmony with his conservative appreciation of traditional peasant life and the unwillingness of the NLM to become involved in anything that smacked of political engagement and social reforms in China. Revealing no awareness of the massive support that the Communist Party of China had mustered among the peasantry, Aavik asserted that there had never been an agrarian revolt in the nation's history and that none was presently afoot. Instead, he believed that the Red Army was merely creating agitation and unrest. Aavik posed and answered the rhetorical question whether the masses of tenant farmers were living in a *de facto* state of slavery with an emphatic No. The more than half of the farmers who did not own land were "more than satisfied to dwell in cotters' huts and cultivate the soil in exchange for one-half of the crop", he insisted. Aavik acknowledged that large tracts of land had come into the possession of military officers and other officials in unethical ways, and with some justification the Reds could therefore confiscate them. However, he professed that "the greatest part" of the farms were properties which farmers had acquired through generations of hard work, an observation he oddly believed that his nearly two decades in the mission field placed him in a position to make. "Is it thus right that the Reds take the land from them and distribute it to others who have never managed to save a cent in their lives, but rather wasted their money on wine and card games?" he asked rhetorically. Drawing an analogy which may have been particularly poignant to much of the NLM's rural constituency, Aavik asked, "What would you, hardworking farmer, say if the authorities confiscated two-thirds of your property and gave it to strangers who had never put in an honest day's work in their lives?" He recalled that when leaving China in 1946 he had the impression that millions of farmers there longed for "the good old days when they knew nothing about something called 'revolution' and politics'."[20]

Dalen was not widely reviewed in Norway, and most of the apparently few reviews of it appeared in newspapers and magazines that were sympathetic to the NLM. Perhaps most notably, Tormod Vågen, the veteran general secretary of that organisation, commented on it in *Utsyn*, the NLM's almost weekly periodical, in October 1949. After expressing surprise that his colleague had written a novel, he lauded the absence of "dead points" in the narrative of *Dalen* and Aavik's ability to retain readers' interest from cover to cover as he traced the life of the deeply troubled protagonist

19 Asbjørn Aavik, "Chinas nye sterke mann" in *Utsyn* LIX, no. 16 (29 May 1949), 5, and no. 17 (5 June 1949), 4.

20 Aavik, "Chinas nye sterke mann" in in *Utsyn* LIX, no. 17, 4.

Hsy and his family and friends. Some convert to or at least evince some appreciation of Christianity; others remain aloof. Vågen especially lauded the inclusion of a great many insights into Chinese culture and daily life in rural areas. Moreover, the struggles of the missionary in question as he made little progress in effecting conversions and encountered seemingly endless misunderstanding of Christianity impressed this reviewer. On the other hand, he mildly took Aavik to task for not probing the "spiritual struggle and experience of salvation of the heathens" more deeply. Vågen concluded his comments by acknowledging–though without explaining why–that he found it anomalous to think of novels in a Christian context.[21]

Narrative Technique and Plot Synopsis

Aavik did not venture far out on a limb of narratorial innovation when crafting *Dalen*. In most respects it is a quite conventional novel. Spanning nearly 300 pages and divided into twenty-six chapters, the story is told by a conventional third-person but not quite omniscient narrator who is clearly sympathetic to Christian missionary endeavours and at times critical of numerous dimensions of Chinese folk religion, Buddhism, and Daoism. Furthermore, the portrayal of secular life in China is generally unflattering. The closing years of the Qing dynasty are depicted as an era marred by bureaucratic corruption, opium addiction, Sinocentric ignorance of cultures beyond the national borders, and other woes. On the other hand, several of the Chinese characters evince generosity towards other people, though with a distinct bias towards their own kin, and a willingness to roll up their sleeves and engage in very demanding work for their own economic advancement and the welfare of their families. For the most part, the narration is lineal with only a small number of brief flashbacks to relate what one segment of the divided Hsy family is doing after stating what another has done.

The story is relatively uncomplicated, and the cast of characters is of modest size. It begins with the family of Hsy-chung-wen, an erstwhile low-ranking bureaucrat who has built up a rice farm in vicinity of Jiujiang on the Yangtse River in Jiangsu province and a few years earlier was involved with unidentified other people in a robbery which resulted in a murder. He has moved in order to avoid prosecution. Now, however, a friend and "blood brother" named Feng informs him that his case is not cold and that legal authorities are about to arrive and arrest him. He convinces Hsy to flee. That fugitive's eldest son, Fulai, who has a wife and infant daughter, is arrested in his stead and imprisoned for several months before his mother, Fanglan, manages to sell the family's farm piece by piece and use the proceeds from the sale to bribe officials to release her son. His health broken by his imprisonment, he dies shortly thereafter. In the meantime, the fugitive elder Hsy has settled in a geographically and culturally remote valley, Steindørdalen (from which the novel's title is derived), in a western corner of Hubei province. Much of his travelling is on sail-powered river

21 "'Dalen', misjonæren Aavik's siste bok" in *Utsyn* LIX, no. 30 (23 Oct 1949), 5.

boats, especially one owned by a small-town purchaser of oil nuts, who takes him to Steindørdalen (Stone Gate Valley). There he is hired to teach at a private school in the home of a prosperous farmer, where this fugitive judiciously maintains a low profile. Subsequently following Hsy on a journey of many weeks are their surviving sons Fuchang and Fuyun, the first of whom is married and has sired a son, and a small number of other family members. Fuyun lives in the Wangs' large house while attending the school and becomes attracted to their youngest daughter, Vårblomst (Spring Blossom). After robbers raid that farm at night and steal many of their belongings, the Wangs are compelled to sell part of their land to Fuchang, who toils mightily for years to build up his own farm on it and other acquired plots.

However, rather than relocating immediately to Steindørdalen, Fanglan announces that she will remain behind for three years, as will her widowed daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Fanglan had become Hsy's spouse in a loveless arranged marriage and never really loved her eldest son. However, she is now guilt-ridden and uses her lonely time to atone for her neglect of him by worshipping Guanyin, the renowned Buddhist goddess of mercy, repeatedly in a nearby temple, despite previously having been directly critical of local religious life and insisting that she had no use for deities. She fears that Fulai's passage from an "ice hell" into paradise might be permanently hindered because of family guilt but hopes that Guanyin will be willing to assist him. Fanglan and her daughter-in-law support themselves by spinning cotton. However, rather than mourning the death of her late husband the younger woman spends a great deal of time grooming herself and attending social gatherings, at some of which, it is implied, she is romantically involved with a man. Her disgusted mother-in-law finds her at one such *rendez-vous*, upbraids her, and spits on her, causing the young widow to lose face. The widow returns to the loom but resents this humiliation and vindictively vows to ruin what remains of the Hsy family. Eventually, however, she commits suicide by hanging, leaving her very young daughter in the care of Fanglan. In the meantime, Fanglan has expanded her efforts to aid Fulai's progress towards paradise by heeding the advice of the prioress of the Buddhist cloister with the Guanyin shrine and visiting the temple of the king of the realm of the dead. Her sacrifices there also fail to yield satisfaction.

The narrative takes a crucial turn in Chapter X when a so-called "utenlandsk djevel" (foreign devil) arrives in the river town where the oil purchaser has his place of business. Never identified by name or national origin, this individual is soon identified as a missionary who holds public teaching sessions to explain the doctrines of his religion. Initially arousing only curiosity, he attracts growing numbers of people to meetings held in a house which he has rented, a structure which townspeople believe has long been haunted and is therefore available at a low fee. This anonymous missionary converts much of the interior into a sanctuary with crude, backless benches, a pulpit, and parchment posters proclaiming the Trinity and other teachings of Christianity. The oil merchant is one of his early attendees, and he in turn introduces Hsy to the

missionary, who successfully treats that refugee teacher's ocular inflammation with protargol (a commercial name of the antibacterial compound silver proteinate). After returning to the Wang farm, Hsy broadcasts the word about this foreigner's medical assistance. The missionary's local reputation advances markedly after he prays for Fuchang's younger boy who is apparently *in extremis* but survives.

In the latter half of *Dalen*, Aavik reins in the cantering pace somewhat to consider in greater detail how several local Chinese people perceive (or, in most cases, misperceive) Christian teachings and also to narrate how the neophyte missionary seeks to make contact with more individuals, both in the town and in Steindørdalen. Respect for him waxes, as does attendance at his weekly services. Conversions are almost non-existent, though eventually Fuyun becomes a Christian, as does his father. In the case of the elder Hsy, this comes after he has long been obsessed with the fear that his late daughter-in-law is haunting him. The missionary prays for him, helping him to regain his mental health. Spiritually, the Christian message of God's unmerited forgiveness of repentant sinners also appeals to this guilt-ridden soul whose crime many years earlier has tormented him. The prosperous farmer Wang seems to be on the verge of converting, despite (or possibly owing to) his poor understanding of the doctrines which the missionary doggedly seeks to explain. However, he succumbs in an epidemic which also takes his daughter, Vårblomst, leaving Fuyun's vision of marrying her unfulfilled.

At the end of *Dalen*, Fanglan still resists conversion; she acknowledges that the missionary and the God to whom he attributes healings have spiritual power but continues to believe that both Guanyin and the king of the realm of the dead must continue to be honoured for ostensibly allowing her son Fulai to enter paradise. She makes a pilgrimage to their temples where she worshipped them many years earlier but to her immense dismay discovers that the cloister with the Guanyin shrine has been closed and the temple of the king of the realm of the dead has been converted into a grain depository. Her spirit apparently broken by these developments, Fanglan dies nearby.

The narrator emphasises that early in the twentieth century China is undergoing a fundamental political and social transformation, especially after the death of the Dowager Empress Cixi in 1908 and in the wake of the Xinhai Revolution in 1911. One symbolic representation of this upheaval is the compulsory removal of men's queues in which they had been required to wear their hair during the Qing dynasty. This is particularly resisted, though eventually accepted, in tradition-bound Steindørdalen.

Finally, it should be noted that in accordance with a recurrent characteristic of missionary fiction, the text of *Dalen* incorporates several authorial efforts to enlighten readers about the culture to which Christianity is being transplanted. Among the topics which one finds in these intrusions are *feng shui* (broadly translated as "geomancy", this is the Chinese practice of seeking to discern the most advantageous physical positions for the placement of houses, graves, and so on as a means of using energy

forces to harmonise individuals with their surrounding environments), time-honoured education in the form of memorising the *Analects* of Confucius, arranged marriages, and burial customs. In general, Aavik presents these and other elements of cultural alterity in unflattering terms and highlights some of them in ways which in the eyes of Norwegian readers of missionary fiction would underscore the desirability of their replacement with Christian beliefs and practices.

A Miscellany of Literary Weaknesses

One cannot avoid thinking that had *Dalen* been issued by a major publishing house under the supervision of a more demanding editor, it could have been an even better novel. A miscellany of unnecessary weaknesses in the text illustrate its fallibility. To begin with, in places the chronology is difficult to follow, not least in the early chapters, which only in retrospect are evidently set in the latter half of the 1890s. Further complicating this problem, readers without knowledge of such events as the chronologically divided reign of the Dowager Empress Cixi and the Xinhai Revolution may have found it exasperating to connect the events which the characters in *Dalen* experience, or at least hear of, with what is happening in the lives of those people in rural China. Without at least a rudimentary knowledge of China's geography, the migration of the Hsy family from one province to another and other movements have little meaning; no doubt the inclusion of a simple map could have alleviated this problem. Moreover, there is unnecessary repetition of detail, such as the description of the Wang family as the owners of the largest farm in the valley. Fulai is said to be twenty years old on page 12, and this is echoed on page 14. The narrator reports on page 222 that Fanglan's hair has become completely white but on page 262 declares that after she endures the horrific tribulation of the epidemic it no longer merely has silver streaks but has become white. The tagging of quotations is not always clear; in places readers must follow very closely to discern which unidentified person is speaking.

Portraying a Deeply Flawed Society

As a backdrop against which the confrontation of Christianity with Chinese folk religions unfolds, Aavik projected an image of China that especially readers in Norway would have found unappealing though not necessarily surprising if they were familiar with stereotypical shortcomings that had been recurrent themes in writing about the Middle Kingdom since the nineteenth century. In *Dalen*, this begins in the first chapter when the narrator emphasises that at harvest time men had to maintain watch on their farms at night because theft was particularly common. This point is re-emphasised in Chapter VII and culminates in the nocturnal raid of bandits on the Wang farm.[22] Other elements of negative portrayal echo such long-standing stereotypes as foot-binding of women (in this case underscoring that Fanglan has been subjected to

22 Asbjørn Aavik, *Dalen* (Stavanger: Misjonsselskapets forlag, 1949), 10, 86.

that practice) and focussing on the negative consequences of arranged marriages. That sons are preferred to daughters is also highlighted at several points. Moreover, bureaucratic corruption seems endemic while due process of law as understood in Norway and other Western societies is non-existent. These judicial points are blatant in the mistreatment of Fulai as the hapless proxy for his father. The local police demand ever-greater ransom payments from his mother, and while receiving that money surreptitiously they merely report to their superiors that the suspect cannot be found. Fanglan is powerless to counter their exploitation. "She knew what power money had among those in power, because they had the official seals" ("Hun visste hvilken makt sølvet hadde blant disse som hadde makten, fordi de hadde seglene").[23]

Wandering further along the path of stereotypical description, Aavik places a negative sign on the bureaucrat who receives the ransom money by noting that he has "yellow, bony, opium fingers" ("gule, magre opiumsfingrer").[24] When Hsy also began to use that narcotic is not stated, but after arriving in Steindørdalen his addiction to it continues.[25]

Traditional Chinese medicine is depicted negatively, most graphically after a costly potion containing dried larvae, powdered leopard vertebrae, and other natural substances which is given to the ailing Hsy fails to impede his physical decline.[26]

That rural Chinese society is fundamentally xenophobic is also explicitly stated. In Steindørdalen, the narrator declares, "All strangers who arrive are frozen out sooner or later" ("Alle fremmede som kommer inn, fryses ut før eller senere").[27] Fanglan learns this at first-hand. After a year there, she still feels like a stranger. Her partial alienation from her husband exacerbates her plight as an outsider in that remote, tradition-bound community.[28] The overthrow of the Qing dynasty does not usher in a golden era of social liberalism and cultural open-mindedness. On the contrary, to underscore the continuation of governmental authoritarianism after the Xinhai Revolution, Aavik described in detail how soldiers executed the above-mentioned decree about queues by forcibly cutting them from the heads of the men in the town near Steindørdalen.[29]

In contrast to the generally deprecating construction of pre-Christian life in China, the missionary's home country (which no Norwegian reader would fail to recognise as Norway) is portrayed, albeit only briefly, as a wholesome land with deep snow, skiing, active spiritual life among Christians, and so on. The text contains no critique of Norwegian social problems or any mention of discord in Lutheran theological circles.

23 Aavik, *Dalen*, 30.
24 Aavik, *Dalen*, 31.
25 Aavik, *Dalen*, 82.
26 Aavik, *Dalen*, 104-105.
27 Aavik, *Dalen*, 39.
28 Aavik, *Dalen*, 222.
29 Aavik, *Dalen*, 233-235.

Such a nuanced depiction of Norway would have undermined the simplified, binary representation of a Christian society and one dominated by Chinese folk religion.

Nevertheless, Aavik sympathetically underscored that China's plight in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was partly of foreign manufacture. He acknowledged explicitly that beginning in 1840 foreign hegemony, legitimised by a series of asymmetrical international treaties and enforced by naval power, allowed resented foreign interests to dominate parts of the Middle Kingdom, and the principle of "extraterritoriality" allowed the governments of other countries to maintain police forces, establish courts of law, station soldiers, and otherwise have a long-term presence there. Missionaries followed in the wake of naval vessels and soon expanded their networks of stations in the Chinese interior. They were not welcome, Aavik granted: "In the end the Dowager Empress felt that these hairy, long-legged devils were everywhere and that they threatened the throne" ("Til slutt hadde enkedronningen en følelse at disse hårete, langbente djevlene var alle steder, og at de truet tronen").[30] Missing from his lament is any mention of such matters as the forced legalisation of importing opium into China and the fact that some of the asymmetrical treaties explicitly granted missionaries the right to establish stations in the interior of the country.

Critique of Chinese Folk Religion

Aavik's central China is hardly a godless society. Rather, it is one where deities – and the fear of them – are nearly ubiquitous. Those mentioned in *Dalen* are, for the most part, deifications of natural forces, some of them supposedly residing in the immediate vicinity with temples for their worship nearby. As Joseph Adler has generalised in *Chinese Religious Traditions*, "Popular religion in China has for the most part been a local affair, although certain deities, such as Guanyin and Mazu, are worshipped on regional and even national levels."[31]

Not that all the Chinese are depicted as religious; they are a spiritually quite differentiated lot. In the gallery of characters in *Dalen*, Aavik devotes a vast amount of space to portraying the devotion and captivity of many to a myriad of local gods as both detrimental to their well-being and a major hindrance to the propagation of the Gospel. However, within the Hsy and Wang extended families, there is little popular devotion before crises drive some of their members to seek spiritual answers in accordance with prevailing cultural traditions. The narrator recalls that in her youth Fanglan's mother went along with others who burned incense before the gods but, in contrast to her companions, she did not assume a posture of subjugation. Instead, this non-worshipper regarded herself as the equal of the deities and, unlike the other women in front of the altar, she did not lower her forehead to the floor. Fanglan

30 Aavik, *Dalen*, 99.

31 Joseph A. Adler, *Chinese Religious Traditions* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 2002), 104.

inherited this lack of obeisance, and despite visiting a temple of the goddess of children shortly before her wedding, as the wife of an official she evinced no use for deities.[32] In this respect, if in no other, Fanglan's personality dovetailed with that of her husband. His attitude towards religious matters emerges in a brief narration of an encounter with a Daoist monk. This bureaucrat is said never to have given such religious figures more than a polite bow when necessary. Even Confucius, whose *Analects* he was required to memorise, meant little to Hsy. As far as conventional religious beliefs were concerned, he was virtually rudderless. In the words of the narrator, "He just sailed through life on miscellaneous ships which came close enough to jump on" ("Han bare seilte gjennom livet på tilfeldige skip som kom nærmest nok til å hoppe på").[33]

Nevertheless, in Steindørdalen evidence of popular devotion to deities is conspicuous. In that agricultural society, soil gods are believed to control the forces of nature and, accordingly, farmers feel obliged to venerate them.[34] In one of the valley's most important temples, no fewer than twenty or twenty-five deities are represented by statues. Among them are the fire god and the cattle king god. The latter, according to the narrator, can send an epidemic and kill cattle within two nights and a day. Nearby sits a benign fertility goddess who is believed to bless residents with male children. The attitudes of the people towards their local divinities in this temple is made explicit: "Rarely did anyone go there with joy in his heart – or voluntarily. All went out of duty, out of fear of punishment and retribution if one did not go" ("Sjelden gikk noen dit med glede i sinnet sitt – eller frivillig. Alle gikk av plikt, av frykt for straff og gjengjeldelse hvis en ikke gikk").[35] Illustrating the point, nearly three pages are devoted to the place of what is called the Stone King ("steinkongen") but might be more meaningfully rendered the Avalanche God in that mountainous terrain. At some unidentified time in the remote past residents of the valley had erected an altar in a cave high on a mountain above it, and annually on the twenty-third day of the twelfth month men and boys from the terrassed agricultural landscape venture up to it to burn incense and paper. They then mumble a prayer: "May the king be merciful and not let rocks fall down – let the fields ripen the grain growing on them, that we need not hunger, and let the houses stand" ("Kongen måtte være barmhjertig og ikke la stein velte – la åkrene få lov å modne kornet som vokste, så de ikke behøvde sulte, or la husene få lov å stå. . . .").[36] In keeping with an inconsistent family tradition, Fuchang does not join those who sacrifice to the Stone King – until after a boulder tumbles down the mountain and destroys the entrance to his new house. The following year

32 Aavik, *Dalen*, 59-60.
33 Aavik, *Dalen*, 106.
34 Aavik, *Dalen*, 11.
35 Aavik, *Dalen*, 213.
36 Aavik, *Dalen*, 211-212.

he relents after being nagged repeatedly by his wife and, incense in hand, joins the pilgrims ascending the mountain.[37]

The temples in and near Steindørdalen resist facile categorisation, but near the close of his first chapter Aavik used a smidgen of creativity to present a topographical hierarchy of them. Within the valley itself and in close proximity to most of its agrarian population are the shrines of the soil gods which according to local belief must be worshipped frequently. The Buddhist temples and those of the other deities are atop hills near the valley. This placement, according to the narrator, seems appropriate, because in contrast to the literally down-to-earth concerns of the soil gods these others have more to do with otherworldly matters and thus thrive at a higher elevation. Thirdly, on one of the mountains stand the white temple of the representative of the ruling god ("herskerguden") whose own abode was Wa-dang-shan, an eight-day pilgrimage away.[38]

As late as the twenty-third chapter, Aavik introduces the plague god, a horrific deity whose wrath and cruelty rituals of the people cannot propitiate. Three hundred years earlier, valley folk had constructed a temple to this and other deities, and traditions of wild dances before the representation of the plague god had evolved. His statue depicts him as "completely black with flaming fire eyes" ("helt svart med flammende ildøyne"). It is to no avail; an epidemic spreads across the valley, taking an unspecified but high number of lives, including those mentioned above in the synopsis of the plot of *Dalen*. The malevolent god in question is not appeased; he merely sits in his temple, "motionless, dark and black as hell itself and did not change his facial expression. In his dark wrath he despised every single soul who came creeping in to his footstool" ("urørlig, mørk og svart som selve helvetet og fortrakk ikke en mine. I mørk vrede foraktet han hver eneste sjel som kom krypende inn til fotskammelen hans").[39]

The inefficacy of popular veneration of Chinese deities is a recurrent theme in this missionary novel. Aavik's climactic *coup de grâce* in this regard comes in the penultimate chapter when Fanglan visits the mountain-top temple of what is described as the highest god anyone had ever met. Surely he, she hopes, can drive the demons out of her possessed husband Hsy. Within the building, Fanglan notices two deep depressions in the hard stone. "Millions and millions had kneeled there with their needs and burdens, knelt through the stone – but nevertheless never found what they sought. . . ." ("Millioner etter millioner hadde knelt der med sin nød og sine byrder – knelt seg gjennom steinen – for likevel aldri å fine det de søkte etter. . . .").[40]

Aavik used Fanglan's involvement with Guanyin and Yan Wang to highlight what he perceived as two sides of Chinese folk religion. From his Christian missionary

37 Aavik, *Dalen*, 212.
38 Aavik, *Dalen*, 11.
39 Aavik, *Dalen*, 247-248.
40 Aavik, *Dalen*, 264.

perspective both are spiritually misdirected, but one is far less nefarious than the other. In the end, both are dead ends that stand in stark contrast to the Gospel message of God's unmerited grace and love for humanity.

The first of these centres on the conversation between Fanglan and the prioress of the cloister which she visits in search of relief for her grief and feelings of guilt after Fulai dies. The prioress there is portrayed as sympathetic and utterly sincere in her willingness to guide Fanglan out of her despair, though also spiritually naïve and trapped in the nexus of popular Buddhist culture, unable to offer the bereaved mother satisfaction. This Buddhist nun confirms Fanglan's fears that there are "many thousands of hells" ("mange tusen helveter"), "some of them scorching, others ice cold" ("noen er glohete, andre iskalde"), but she cannot answer Fanglan's query about whether her deceased son is in a cold one. The prioress can only remember an older colleague explaining many years earlier that people who did not receive love in this world would end there. When challenged about the possible innocence of the unloved, this nun had replied that "we are all in the cycle of karma and do not determine anything ourselves. When it had made another cycle, one could begin anew. It depends on what does then" ("vi var alle i Kharmas hjul og bestemte ingenting selv. Når en hadde fulgt hjulet rundt, fikk en begynne om igjen. Så kom det jo an på hva en ble i neste rundgang").[41]

This uncertainty fails to satisfy Fanglan's quest for emotional and spiritual equanimity, and in a pathetically described effort to give her peace, the prioress hands her a pair of well-used bamboo "oracle blocks" ("orakelklosser") which Fanglan tosses into the air. To her dismay, they land on the floor with one flat side down and the other up – *i.e.* not a confirmatory "shwen" (or "xuen" in more modern Roman orthography) answer from Guanyin. "Maybe the answer will be better next time!" ("Kan hende neste gang ville svaret bli bedre!"), the narrator sceptically reports her thinking.[42]

Fanglan's visit to the horrifying Yan Wang temple is far more cynically constructed. The narrator describes the art work in it graphically as relating the punishments which the dead must endure. Entering the hall, she notices a sign which her illiteracy prevents her from reading but which reminds one of the inscription at the entrance to the Inferno in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate" (Abandon all hope, ye who enter here): "Hui hou chi", meaning "too late to regret". A priest therein dutifully pounds on a drum, and upon seeing the size of the contribution which Fanglan places into a sacrificial urn he increases the tempo of his beating significantly. That is only the beginning: "When Fanglan turns her back on him, he looks around, and the money lands somewhere up one of his wide sleeves" ("Men som

41 Aavik, *Dalen*, 68.
42 Aavik, *Dalen*, 69-70.

Fanglan har snudd ryggen til, ser han seg omkring, og sølvet havner et sted oppi et av de vide ermene hans").[43]

Walking down a long passageway, Fanglan notices fearsome artistic depictions of what awaits the dead. They include *inter alia* two demons cranking a mill into which a third stuffs a person head-first, wolves gnawing on the bones of people whom they have eaten, a sea of blood, people impaled on spears, and an iceberg on which people climb laboriously towards the summit by grasping the ice with their fingernails but, in a scene reminiscent of the myth of Sisyphus in Greek mythology, shortly before reading it lose their grip and must begin afresh at the bottom. Fanglan perceives Fulai among those eternally hapless souls. This visibly shaken mother also notices an artistic representation of "yin-chao", or realm of the dead money, which can be used to bribe demons who weigh the sins of the deceased. She later responds by buying a bundle of such currency and burning it on Fulai's grave in the belief that he can use it to further his progress through hell.[44]

On a later visit to this temple, the priest assures Fanglan that Fulai has been liberated from the ice hell and entered paradise, then begins to beat his drums anew. To confirm the good news, he uses a prop now familiar to Fanglan: "And with a graceful move of his hand he throws the blocks. But Fanglan did not notice that he moved his hand in a bow nearly to the floor while doing so" ("Og med en grasiøs håndbevegelse kaster han klossene. Men Fanglan merkte ikke at han slo hånden in en bue nesten til golvet idet han gjorde det"). This priest shows her that both blocks have landed with their flat side up. Her feeling of relief is enormous, but her desire to confirm that result by throwing the blocks herself is frustrated by his insistence that doing so would insult the gods. Fanglan accepts his explanation as rational and leaves the temple after giving that priest a supplementary gift.[45]

Gradual Acceptance of the Missionary in Rural Chinese Society

It is thus in an environment of pervasive religious fear, suspicion, and deceit that the anonymous but presumably Norwegian Lutheran missionary seeks to propagate the Gospel. He has no name and, apparently, no accompanying family; there is no unambiguous indication of his national origin; and nowhere in his proclamation of the Gospel and efforts to help local Chinese people with basic medical treatment does one find anything to set him apart from counterparts in numerous Protestant denominations and missionary agencies. Endowed with only the scantiest individuality, "the missionary" thus serves as a proxy for missionaries in general. As an obvious element of his rhetorical strategy, Aavik continued to intersperse in the narrative episodes which further illuminate Chinese captivity to local religious traditions, including the

43 Aavik, *Dalen*, 71-72.
44 Aavik, *Dalen*, 73-74.
45 Aavik, *Dalen*, 143.

appeasement of feared gods, thereby juxtaposing these burdensome old ways with the liberating Gospel which the missionary proclaims and some of the people in and near the valley find appealing.

Upon hearing of the missionary's arrival in the river town, residents of the valley initially refer to him as a "foreign devil" ("utenlandsk djevel"), echoing a xenophobic tradition of placing such a label on virtually any non-Chinese person.[46] The superficiality of their criticism of this man before making more than an initial acquaintance with him is highlighted almost immediately. The wife of the nut oil dealer, for example, tells an unidentified person in the town that this outlander had been audacious enough to doff his hat on the street and, upon entering her husband's place of business stretched his arm over the counter and vigorously shaken that of her husband up and down. What is more, the foreign devil's fist was "as hairy as a monkey, right out to the fingers" ("håret som på en ape, like ut på fingrene"). Continuing down the path of unreserved conduct, this barbarian ("barbarer") had looked and smiled directly at her, and her foolish man had encouraged his unconventional behaviour by offering him a cup of tea, which had been received with only one hand rather than with two in accordance with Chinese tradition. "But what can one expect of people who live far at the end of the world – far removed from all manners" ("Men hva kan en vente av folk som bor helt der ute ved enden av jorden – slik langt vekke fra all folkeskikk") she wonders.[47] Furthermore, some of the villagers find it incomprehensible that someone would come from the other side of the world to proclaim his religion. Hence, suspicion of his motives lurks below the surface.[48]

In gaining a hearing in tradition-bound Steindørdalen, the significance of no event is stressed more than the missionary's willingness to treat Wang's inflamed eyes free of charge with protargol. That elderly farmer is initially reluctant but relents upon the advice of his friend the nut oil merchant. The treatment proves effective; Wang awakens the next morning with the inflammation significantly reduced. He returns to the church for further drops, which the missionary gladly administers gratis. This prompts the impressed Wang to invite him to Steindørdalen.[49] In the history of the NLM this is noteworthy because it initially lacked the personnel to engage in much medical ministry at its stations. Medical treatment was offered at an early stage, and after the turn of the century the Norwegian-American Tønnes Frøyland opened a rudimentary hospital at Laohekou. His martyrdom in 1914,[50] however, was a major

46 Aavik, *Dalen*, 113.
47 Aavik, *Dalen*, 114.
48 Aavik, *Dalen*, 124.
49 Aavik, *Dalen*, 126-129.
50 "Minneapolis Missionary Slain By Chinese Bandits; One Wounded" in *The Minneapolis Journal*, 12 March 1914, 1.

setback until the arrival of another physician, Olaf Olsen, in the early 1920s and the completion of the Frøyland Memorial Hospital at Laohekou in 1928.[51]

Not only such practical assistance but also familiarisation breeds respect for, or at least acceptance and recognition of, the missionary's essential humanity. When the elderly Wang makes a rare trip to the village, he asks the oil dealer about the ostensibly diabolical foreigner but receives an unexpected answer: "We call him a 'teacher' here, and as far as I can understand he is not a devil but just a normal person" ("Lærer kaller vi ham her, og han er ikke djevel så langt jeg kan skjønne. Bare et alminnelig menneske").[52] Not long thereafter the curious Wang has a conversation with the missionary and learns a bit about his family and homeland, including the willingness of many Christians there to support financially numerous other compatriots in their mission to tell China about the true God. Initially finding this foreigner's religious beliefs difficult to comprehend, Wang begins to grasp that he is a person much like the local people, despite his skin colour, height, and clumsiness.[53] Progress towards acceptance is inconsistent. More hesitant in welcoming the missionary is Wang's wife. When this foreigner finally visits Steindørdalen and enters the Wang home, she, along with her daughters-in-law, insists that her grandchildren will never have drops placed into their eyes. The oil dealer assures her that he is quite normal and that if the bed in the Wangs' guest room is too short, he will simply sleep with his legs extending out of it. Cordial conversation over dinner convinces Mrs. Wang that the missionary is "fully human – for a devil" ("rent menneskelig – til djevel å være").[54] Signalling his attainment of a high level of acceptance, he is invited to new year festivities in Steindørdalen, before baptising a single convert to Christianity.[55]

Proclaiming a Simplified Gospel in a Polytheistic Society

Broadly speaking, in Aavik's construction of the missionary's proclamation of Christianity one finds a progression from a declaration of monotheism to polytheistic audiences to forgiveness of sinners to a dying sinner. At no point is it suggested that most of his auditors understand, much less accept, the doctrines he preaches. However, *some* of them find parts of his message comprehensible, and a few hear in it echoes of Buddhist and Confucian teachings.

Nailing his monotheistic colours to the mast while sailing in a turbulent sea of polytheism, the missionary announces in his simple sanctuary that there is but one God. Reporting this to Wang, the oil merchant recalls that there is no worshipping of Confucius, Buddha, or any of the diverse deities who local people believe exist.

51 "Da 'dr. Frøylands Minne' blev innviet" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 25 (17 June 1928), 2.
52 Aavik, *Dalen*, 116.
53 Aavik, *Dalen*, 127-128.
54 Aavik, *Dalen*, 168.
55 Aavik, *Dalen*, 215.

Compounding the difficulty of comprehending this alien notion, the missionary has also proclaimed that there exist God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Such a trinity is beyond the mental grasp of these elderly Chinese, and the notion that Jesus is somehow the Son of God seems especially odd. They find the missionary's description of speedy locomotives more interesting than his religious teachings.[56]

When the missionary visits the Wang home in Steindørdalen for the first time, he seeks to contextualise his message in that agricultural community. God provides, he announces after those assembled complete their meal. God provides not only clothing, but also the opportunity to till the soil. But to what end are our efforts, he asks, if the true God has not provided rain and sunshine? This is meaningful to Wang, who interrupts to assure him that truer words had never been uttered in his house. Having established some measure of credibility and common ground with his audience by beginning with tangible matters of immediate relevance to their farming life, the missionary proceeds to more abstract concerns by professing that our good deeds in this world do not help us a whit to enter the next. For that, we need God. At that point, the missionary makes his first attempt to marshal Chinese tradition to illustrate a theistic point. The God whom we need is invisible, as Confucius said. "The true God has no form and cannot be seen; a go who can be seen is not a true god" ("Den sanne Gud har ingen skikkelse – kan ikke ses – en gud som kan ses, er ingen sann gud"). How meaningful this appeal to the authority of Confucius is to most of those present is not stated. However, Fuyun nudges his friend and schoolmate, as they have recently read this in the *Analects*.[57]

No similar attempt at asserting common ground with Chinese tradition is made in the missionary's subsequent preaching that evening, however. Instead, he pursues a quintessentially Christian line of teaching by explaining how God created heaven and earth, animals, and people, how the latter became sinners, and how Jesus has atoned for their fall. In an expression of gratitude and a revelation of the limits of his own grasp of what he has heard, Wang declares that his foreign guest has proclaimed the truth and points with his pipe to his family's "heaven and earth" chart above the dining table. The Chinese characters on it declare, "Heaven, earth, emperor, ancestors and the teacher shall be honoured and worshipped" ("Himmel, jord, keiser, forfedre og læreren skal æres og tilbedes").[58]

The notion that certain Christian teachings resonate with East Asian religious doctrines crops up later in the text. Some of the people who attend services in the missionary's sanctuary are Buddhists. Sitting on the rough benches, they hear his preaching and compare it with what the Buddha had taught. The narrator comments

56 Aavik, *Dalen*, 118-119, 126.
57 Aavik, *Dalen*, 169-170.
58 Aavik, *Dalen*, 170.

that there is much they can work into their own spiritual life.[59] Disappointingly, however, the text does not reveal what inheres in the supposedly common ground. Similarly, Confucians in attendance discover that part of the Christian message resonates "with some of the best which their great teacher had written" ("med noe av det beste den store læreren deres hadde skrevet"). They believe that Jesus was a great teacher, an ascetic like few others, and a powerful worker of miracles. His disciples, they also believe, lost face by abandoning him and hiding in an upper room but had regained face elsewhere.[60]

At a critical point in the narrative, the missionary is summoned in a nearly desperate effort to save the life of Fuchang and Dafeng's second young son. Emphasised in this section is the confidence with which this man of Christ ministers to the family. "He states succinctly why he came to their country. He tells them about the great, powerful God whom he serves and proclaims, a God stronger than all other gods and above all evil spirits. All must yield to him. Everything. Sickness, death and devils flee wherever he comes. This mighty God is here today" ("Han forteller i noen korte ord hvorfor han kom til landet deres. Forteller om den store, mektige Gud som han tjener og forkynner. En Gud sterkere enn alle andre guder og over all vonde ånder. Alle må vike for ham. Alt. Sykdom, død, og djevlere flyr der han kommer. Denne mektige Gud er her i dag"). Never previously, reveals the narrator, has the missionary felt God's power so evidently near him.[61]

A final dimension of the missionary's presentation of the Gospel in rural China dovetails perfectly with the themes of death and guilt that are so prominent in *Dalen*. The elderly Hsy, no longer possessed by demons since his son, Fuyun, who has become a Christian, prayed for his recovery, is approaching death. The missionary visits him and finds him extremely frail but mentally alert, sufficiently so to appreciate the missionary's assurance that God will forgive him all his sin even if he does not set foot in any temple. When Hsy admits that he cannot comprehend that, his Christian visitor acknowledges that neither does he. Rather, he merely quotes I John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." With that assurance, Hsy is ready to leave this world, but he requests baptism when the missionary returns.[62] This simple proclamation of forgiveness and assurance of salvation stands in stark contrast to the nearly endless tribulation which his wife Fanglan has endured in her efforts to atone for her own shortcomings and advance Fulai's progress through hell to paradise.

59 Aavik, *Dalen*, 207-208.
60 Aavik, *Dalen*, 208.
61 Aavik, *Dalen*, 181-182.
62 Aavik, *Dalen*, 271-273.

Conclusion

Any critical evaluation of *Dalen* must take into account the fact that it was by no means written from a disinterested perspective but purposefully crafted by a member of a theologically conservative missionary agency whose *raison d'être* was the evangelisation of China. Whatever respect representatives of the NLM had for certain aspects of Chinese civilisation was overshadowed by their dedication to the task of transplanting monotheism as understood from a Lutheran perspective to that utterly polytheistic society. Accordingly, Aavik wrote from an utterly subjective perspective in which a Gospel of grace and forgiveness is favoured while Chinese folk religion is depicted as a hindrance not only to the proliferation of that Gospel but also as a powerfully negative force which kept people in thrall to non-existent, malevolent, and capricious gods. With this mindset, Aavik's portrayal of non-Christian life in China leaves precious little room for happiness, peace of mind, and love among the devotees of those deities. With exceptions, missionary novels, like much other writing by missionaries about their ministries in challenging environments, were often written to stimulate support among sponsoring communities, *i.e.* to reinforce the need for a continued and indeed enhanced evangelistic and other presence in the field.

Within the context of Norwegian church and missions history, *Dalen* is particularly noteworthy because it contrasts sharply with what a far more renowned – and controversial – churchman in Norway, Kristian Schjelderup, had written about Buddhism and other pre-Christian religious beliefs and practices in China in the early 1920s, *i.e.* when Aavik was preparing to become a missionary in the Middle Kingdom. This future bishop spent much of 1922 in India, Japan, and China studying Eastern religions, partly as a participant-observer, before completing his doctorate in the Norwegian capital. As a special correspondent of the daily newspaper *Aftenposten*, he wrote enthusiastically, though at times with reserve, about Buddhism, chiefly after spending more than a fortnight at the monastery on Mount Putuo in Zhejiang province. In one of his reports, Schjelderup lauded Guanyin as "Chinese Buddhism's Virgin Mary" and castigated Christian missionaries for allegedly failing to immerse themselves in the life and faith of "the heathens". He suggested that Guanyin should be perceived as one dimension of God's infinite being.[63] But whereas Schjelderup could assert after a few sheltered months in the Middle Kingdom that Chinese people believed Guanyin helped them, the seasoned missionary Aavik, having served for well over a decade in China during periods of political upheaval, ongoing poverty, epidemics, and other tribulations, declared that this goddess of mercy failed to ameliorate the plight of the populace and concluded that veneration of her was little more than a hindrance to the acceptance of God's grace.

63 Kristian Schjelderup, "Kwanyin Pusa" in *Aftenposten*, 26 August 1922, 1, 3.

In terms of colonial discourse theory, at least on the surface *Dalen* is blue-ribbon grist for the mill of critics who have lamented the tendency of writers from Western countries to write about China in terms that justify foreign intervention on the grounds of cultural upliftment. This novel was written by a member of a religious community (and principally for readers in it) for whom Christianity was a divine gift for the liberation of humanity from the shackles of what they regarded as false, exploitative, and directly harmful religious beliefs and practices. *Dalen* confirmed pre-existing attitudes; it was a sermon in fiction preached to the converted in Norway. On the other hand, it must be underscored that the sole missionary character in *Dalen* criticises explicitly, albeit only briefly, the asymmetrical international treaties that had been imposed on China since the nineteenth century, and nowhere in this novel did Aavik defend foreign political hegemony or economic exploitation in that country.

Both the study of missions history and Norwegian literary scholarship can benefit from a long-overdue comprehensive study of Aavik's *œuvre*, perhaps ideally one which considers it in the context of international writing about China, encompassing but by no means limited to religious elements. Much paydirt awaits extraction from that lode.