

# Reaching Tibet

## Anglophone Protestant Missionaries and the Chinese Civilizing Mission

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There is a long-running trope in the English-speaking world of Tibet as a land of mystery and spiritual depth tragically smothered by Chinese Communist rule. Less well-known is that, especially prior to 1949 and the full arrival of the Cold War in East Asia, many (perhaps even most) sectors of Anglophone society publicly supported – with varying degrees of nuance, to be sure – Chinese rule in Tibet. Why, in an era of growing enthusiasm for national self-determination, and considering their own biases against the Chinese people and their governments, was this the case?

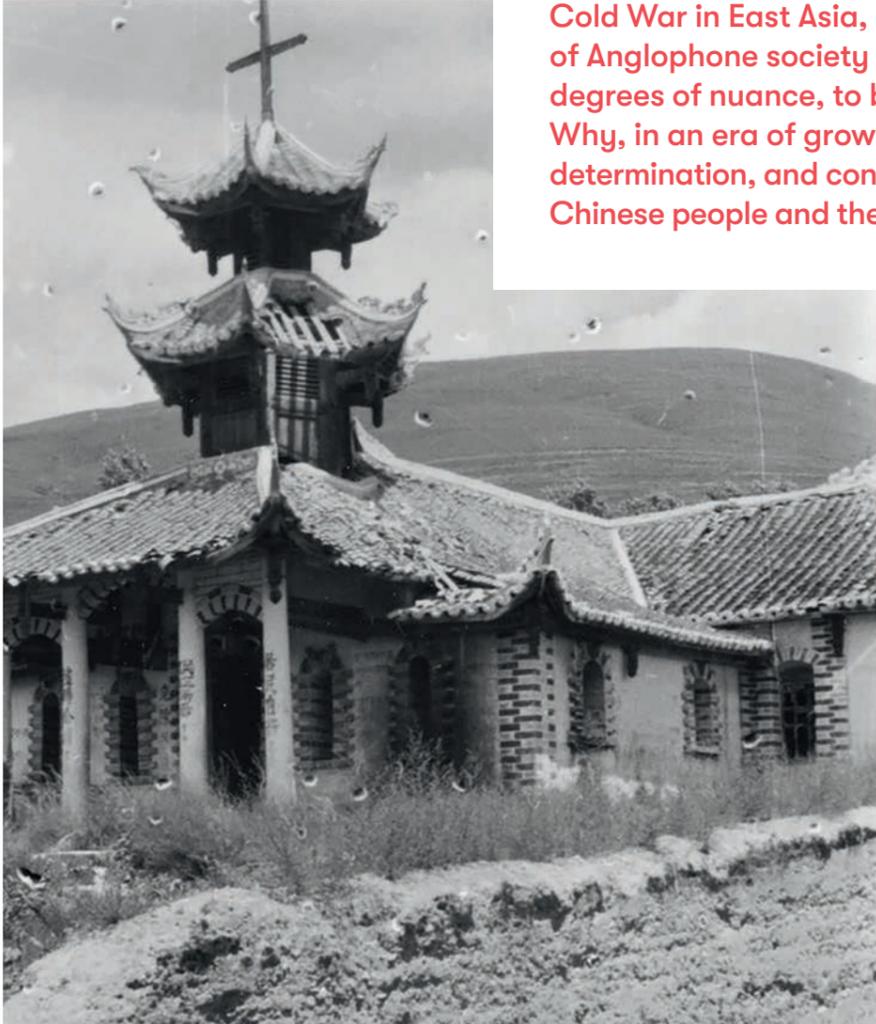


Fig. 1: Church in eastern Tibet, ca. 1941. (Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library)

This brief essay cannot address all of the possible answers to this question, but it will offer a partial answer by drawing attention to one significant group consistently advocating for Chinese rule of Tibet: Anglophone Protestant missionaries in China. When reading the public writings of these missionaries, one notices two major rationales for their support for Chinese rule. First, many held some notion of a hierarchical scale of civilizations, in which the Chinese were more civilized than Tibetans and therefore had a legitimate claim to conduct a civilizing mission. Second, the more pragmatic view was that since Chinese authorities were almost always more tolerant of Christianity than were Tibetan ones, Chinese rule would be beneficial for evangelistic goals.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I present examples of Anglophone Protestant missionary writing on the matter from three sources: (1) articles from a newspaper written for and by missionaries in southwest China and eastern Tibet, (2) selections from an academic journal published in Chengdu but distributed internationally, and (3) examples from books published in the West that were intended for popular consumption.

### Early assessments in the West China Missionary News

A good source for missionary attitudes on many topics related to what is now often known as “southwest China” is the *West China Missionary News* (WCMN), the longest-running English-language publication in the region,

published without significant interruption in Sichuan Province between 1899-1945. Although the readership was, by design, quite narrow – active missionaries in the region, most of whom, notably, entered the southwest by traveling up the Yangtze from Shanghai and were first of all missionaries to China (i.e., not to Tibet) – one can get from it a good sense of the perspectives of missionaries on the ground. The following are three telling examples from the last years of the Qing Dynasty and around the time of the Republican Revolution.

The first significant mention of Tibet in the WCMN occurred in 1903, under the heading “Tachienlu Notes” (Tachienlu is a town now known as Kangding).<sup>2</sup> The article was simply a note about the conditions for missionaries living in and around Tachienlu. The author states that the region can be quite pleasant, with its many mineral baths, fresh air, and good apples. On the other hand, he also notes that the peaches are bad, and that the region is entirely lacking in modern medicine. Still, all things considered, he concludes by encouraging more missionaries to follow him to the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. This earliest account, thus, promoted a vision of eastern Tibet as a frontier, an open space with ample natural resources, but not yet fully integrated into the modern world or the mission.

Subsequent writers in the WCMN, while not denying certain idyllic features, also noted a major problem in the region: Tibetans. A term that regularly appears in the WCMN to describe the Tibetan people is “lawless,” which is often placed in direct contrast with Chinese “order.” Most often, the largest portion

of blame for the lawlessness was put at the feet of the “lamas.” As one missionary put it, the lamas were “a low, demoralized, sensual, avaricious class, whose only care is to think out ways and means to get the possessions of the laity turned into the monasteries for their own use.”<sup>3</sup> In light of perceived lama depravity, the author goes on to say that God is using the Chinese generals to “open up this country, not only to Chinese rule and commerce, but also the preaching of the gospel.” Here we see clearly articulated the view that Providence was leading China to rule the region, and that Chinese rule would dethrone the corrupt lamas of Tibetan Buddhism and bring in their place Christianity, Commerce, and Civilization.

A similar take is articulated a few months later in the WCMN by China Inland Missionary Robert Cunningham (1883-1942), who managed a congregation in Kangding. Cunningham likewise celebrated the advent of Chinese rule in eastern Tibet, suggesting that the Chinese government armies were nobly fighting against savagery.<sup>4</sup> Further, according to Cunningham, in stark contrast to the superstitious lamas, the Chinese officials modeled modern secular authority. He noted, for instance, the “entire absence of all false worship ... not a single stick of incense” when Chinese authorities established government offices in the region. Thus, for Cunningham and other early missionary observers writing for the WCMN, the strengthening of Chinese authority in the region was obviously to be welcomed.

### Missionary scholars consider the case

In 1922, a group of southwest China-based missionary scholars and explorers gathered in Chengdu to form the West China Border Research Society and publish its eponymous journal (*JWCBRS*). Eventually, the *JWCBRS* gained international attention and was distributed to most major university libraries in the Anglophone world. The first issue of the *JWCBRS* articulated the Society’s goal: to promote all types of academic research “in the hill country and among the tribes of West China” and to offer “a service for ourselves, for the Chinese, for the world” (noticeably, not for the “tribes” themselves).<sup>5</sup> Although many articles involving Tibet were without overt political or religious implications (for example, there are frequent essays on geological features, though these too might imply future mineral extraction), those that did touch on these issues suggested that, overall, Tibet was an intriguing but primitive place, and in need of Chinese civilizing rule.

The very first paper presented to the Society set the tone on this matter. In “Journey into the Hoefan Valley,” Canadian Methodist missionary T.E. Plewman described his encounters with Tibetans and Qiang as he traveled in northwest Sichuan.<sup>6</sup> Although

many of the Tibetans he encountered were, he admitted, quite friendly, he nonetheless believed that a significant number of them were “opium sots” and/or “bandits.” Regarding those Tibetans who had thrown off Chinese overlordship, he wrote, “their independence had not brought them happiness,” as lawlessness prevailed when Tibetans were left to govern themselves. In the end, he does not think China can manage to re-conquer the region immediately, but in time, he says, it is the only possible good result.

In J.H. Edgar’s (1872-1936) essay, “Geographic Control and Human Reactions in Tibet,” Edgar (who lived longer than most missionaries in eastern Tibet) fulsomely praises the Tibetan people for their resilience in the face of such adverse geographic conditions, but he also argues that they have no means to advance until another nation takes the reins and opens them up to the modern world.<sup>7</sup> Edgar believed that the Tibetans were a civilized people: he compared them favorably to the less civilized, in his estimation, Pacific Islanders and Australian Aborigines. Nevertheless, he also argued that Tibetan civilization, such as it was, was only barely held together by a destitute theocracy, ruled by abusive “priests and magicians.” Edgar concludes his essay with this: “No land may shut her doors and live for herself. Men must free themselves from fortresses and backwashes. They must profit by other controls and be guided by customs and laws which have met with universal approval. No nation will be free to remain backward, and Tibet will not be neglected.” After considering several candidates to do the opening, he settles on China to be the most likely and the most preferable.

In another article, Edgar approaches the question of Tibet from a missionary perspective, arriving at much the same conclusion: China should open Tibet.<sup>8</sup> Edgar notes the awkwardness of this point in light of his thesis that an “enlightened world conscience” now calls for weaker groups to have “self-determination.” But, he wonders, what would independence actually mean for Tibet? Better, he thinks, for Tibetans to become an “interesting constituent in the world’s greatest human amalgam” – that is, China. From a missionary perspective, Edgar argues that “Lamaism” has always and will always staunchly resist Christianity, whereas Chinese authorities are relatively open-minded. As such, he concludes, missionaries should count themselves fortunate that “more than half of Tibetan population is not directly under the Lhasa hierarchy.”

### Bringing it all back home

Although the WCMN and *JWCBRS* surely reveal common attitudes among Anglophone missionaries in the region, perhaps of wider import, in terms of influence, were the books written by the missionaries for their publics back home. Here, we briefly survey four such volumes, showcasing their tendency to mix a Chinese civilizing mission with the practical benefit of Chinese rule for missionaries.

David (?-1912) and Robert Ekvall (1898-1983), a father and son working as missionaries with the Christian and Missionary Alliance, provide a good example of the thinking on the matter. A.B. Simpson, the founder of the Alliance, once famously declared that Tibet would be “the last land—before the Lord returns,” thus putting a target on it for Alliance missionaries. David Ekvall was one of the first to respond to Simpson’s call, basing himself in Gansu, a province famous throughout history for connecting Central Asian cultures with China. In his 1907 book, the elder Ekvall wrote, “Ten Tibetans, nine thieves, is not only a current saying, but one pregnant with truth.”<sup>9</sup> He believed that all Tibetans were “semi-savages” when contrasted with the “decorous” Chinese, but he saved particular scorn for the “grossly immoral” lamas of the Labrang monastery: “what must be the moral filth of this bee-hive of useless drones! ... [gold cannot hide the] wickedness of these lazy know-nothings and do-nothings.” Compared with his father, Robert Ekvall was considerably more moderate. Nonetheless, he too accepted a civilizational hierarchy with China on top, describing Taozhou in Gansu as “a city where Chinese culture and learning, Moslem keenness and trading ability, and Tibetan wildness were



Fig. 2: Map of China from the prominent missionary strategy text, *The Christian Occupation of China* (China Continuation Committee, 1922), accepting all of the Qing Dynasty domains as properly a part of the modern Chinese nation.

all mingled.”<sup>10</sup> The younger Ekvall, like many of the more conservative missionaries, did not evince much interest in politics overall. His focus remained squarely on evangelization. Still, on that basis alone, he approved of the “religious tolerance of the Chinese” compared to Tibetans who, he regretted, tended to throw Christian tracts right back at the missionaries.

Seventh-Day Adventist Clarence Crisler (1877-1936) took a similar view in his posthumously published volume. Crisler, who was primarily based in Shanghai, but traveled to the region, noted that Chinese rule in eastern Tibet benefited his mission: “The formation of Sikang [the new Chinese-run province] has been followed by several changes that may in time prove favorable to our mission advance... a considerable number of administrative and cultural improvements have gradually been displacing the former rule by the Tibetan lamas of this eastern third of ancient Tibet.”<sup>11</sup> Crisler went on to declare that Chinese rule in eastern Tibet was an example of “the Lord opening doors,” and he noted that the more territory China controlled and the less Lhasa did, the better for Christian evangelism.

The examples of the Ekvalls and Crisler might both be said to represent the conservative wing of the Christian mission, but much the same sentiment towards the question of Chinese rule over Tibet was expressed from more liberal corners as well. For example, in the YMCA’s wartime publication, *China Rediscovered Her West*, the editors began: “Because of its isolation, China’s great West was largely neglected and forgotten by other parts of the country. But it is being rediscovered: its history, its culture, its immense agricultural and industrial potentialities, and, above all, its human and spiritual resources for national defense and reconstruction.”<sup>12</sup> The volume was primarily intended to drum up support in the Anglophone world for China’s war efforts against Japan. The resources, both human and natural, of China’s West were seen as key to that effort. So, Canadian missionary R.O. Joliffe (1874-1959), wrote: “Today, [we must see Central Asia] not as an independent unit but as an integral part of the great Chinese family,

it gives of its vast resources in a supreme effort to preserve the nation, to resist the enemy, and to build the great new China that is to be.” George Fitch (1883-1979), a YMCA Secretary with 30 years’ experience in Shanghai, compared China’s western frontier to the American one: “The Days of the ‘Golden West’ were the most romantic period in America’s history. Today much the same romance is being enacted in China,” suggesting a wide-open space, ready for Chinese settlers to exploit. Few of the contributors made much of the people already living in the area, but D.S. Dye (1888-1977), echoing Edgar’s sentiment, closed out the volume by explaining to his Anglophone readership that not only was the integration of China’s West necessary for the war effort, but that the Christianization of Tibet would ultimately be wholly dependent on Chinese control of the region.

Thus, we can see that prior to 1949, among Anglophone Protestant missionaries active in China and eastern Tibet, there was little disagreement: Chinese rule of Tibet would benefit both the Tibetans and the missionary enterprise.

### Conclusion

Outside the main line of this essay, but worthy of note, is that prior to 1949, it is also not hard to find examples of politicians and intellectuals in China who admit to taking some amount of inspiration from foreign missionary activity in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. Anthropologist Chen Zongxiang (b. 1919), for example, used Western missionary work in eastern Tibet as a model, urging Chinese educationalists and medical crews to move to the region in order to “transform the Tibetans into a modern society” by mimicking “the educational crown of Xikang,” the missionary medical school in Ba’an.<sup>13</sup> Another anthropologist, Xu Yitang (1896-1953), was struck by the power of Christianity for nation-building, and he urged China to unify all the people (and especially those of the southwestern borderlands) by creating a new national religion that would use a blending of Confucianism

and Christianity as its base.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese Christian church, during the war with Japan, also followed missionary educational models as they set up Border Service Stations. These were partly funded by the government in Chongqing to help bring the region into the national fold, much as the YMCA volume urged.<sup>15</sup> It would be a great exaggeration (and Eurocentric and ahistorical) to say that Anglophone Protestant missionaries were somehow responsible for early 20th-century Chinese nationalist views of Tibet. Nonetheless, it is probably not too far off to see missionaries and Chinese officials and intellectuals as operating in a kind of mobius band of influence, where missionaries were inspired by features of the spread of Chinese civilization (be it Confucian or modern nationalist) vis-à-vis primitive Tibet, and they, in turn, inspired Chinese colleagues.

Anglophone discourse about Tibet significantly shifted after 1949. Quite suddenly, the “semi-savage” nature of Tibet seemed not nearly as threatening as did the specter of global communism. Missionaries, like so many other sectors of Anglophone society (including business and political ones), abruptly took a decidedly pro-Tibet and anti-China turn. This obviously Cold War development should not, however, obscure the fact that, prior to 1949, decades of missionaries strongly supported the Chinese civilizing mission in Tibet. Most Protestant missionary writing on the matter was clear: Chinese rule was preferable, both in terms of assumed civilizational hierarchies and as an aid to the advance of the missionary project in the region. One way of looking at it might be to admit that the “Pedagogy of Imperialism”<sup>16</sup> was a very successful pedagogy, indeed, such that by the early 20th century, the line between teachers and students was becoming blurred, all accepting the naturalness of the emergence of modern, capitalist nation-states from the foundation provided by a traditional empire.

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### Notes

- 1 The view presented in this article, while obscured in popular discourse, has not been totally lost on scholars, see especially Bray, J. “Christian Missions and the Politics of Tibet, 1850-1950.” in *The History of Tibet Vol. III: The Modern Period: 1895-1959: Encounter with Modernity*. RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp.489-500.
- 2 Beaman, W. “Tachienlu Notes” WCMN (Nov. 1903).
- 3 Fergusson, W. “Anterior Tibet.” WCMN (Dec. 1911).
- 4 Cunningham, R. WCMN (Oct. 1912). In another article, Cunningham suggested that many of the Chinese troops were in fact “enquirers” from Chengdu’s churches. Cunningham, R. WCMN (Sept. 1911).
- 5 Morse, W. “Presidential Address.” JWCBS (1922-1923): 2-7.
- 6 Plewman, T. “Journey into the Hoefan Valley.” JWCBS (1922-1923): 14-36.
- 7 Edgar, J. “Geographic Control and human Reaction in Tibet.” JWCBS (1924-1925): 2-18.
- 8 Edgar, J. “The Great Open Lands: Or, What (a) Is China’s Policy in the Tibetan Marches; and (b) Its Relation to Mission Programs?” JWCBS (1930-1931): 14-21.
- 9 Ekvall, D. *Outposts or Tibetan Border Sketches*. Alliance Press, 1907, pp. 49 and 53-55.
- 10 Ekvall, R. *Gateway to Tibet: The Kansu-Tibetan Border*. Christian Publications, 1938, pp. 13 and 37.
- 11 Crisler, C. *China’s Borderlands and Beyond*. Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1937, pp. 26 and 45.
- 12 Wu, Y. and F. Price, eds. *China Rediscovered Her West: A Symposium*. Friendship Press, 1940, pp. xi, 12 and 195.
- 13 Chen, Z. “Wo duiyu ‘shehui gongzuo’ de renshi” *Huawen yuekan* 2.4-5 (1943): pp. 45-48.
- 14 Xu, Y. *Lei-Ma-Ping-E jilue*. Sichuansheng jiaoyuting, 1941, pp. 24-25.
- 15 Yang, T. *Jiushu yu ziji: Zhonghua Jidu jiaohui bianjiang fuwu yanjiu*. Sanlian shudian, 2010.
- 16 Hevia, J. *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth Century China*. Duke University Press, 2003.