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 Protestant 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?

This brief essay cannot address all of the possible answers to this question, but it will offer a partial answer by drawing on one significant group consistently advocating for Chinese rule of Tibet: Anglophone Protestant missionaries in China. When reading the public writings of Tibetans, 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. 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 few 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 in eastern Tibet). The article was simply a note about the conditions for missionaries living there, and 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 peasants 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 borders. 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 of 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 “Tibetans.” As one missionary put it, the lamas were “a law, 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.” 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 to the preaching of the gospel.” Here we see clearly articulated the view that Providence was leading China to rule the region, and that Chinese authority was a self-imposed “civilization.” But, he also observes, “the enlightened lamas of Tibetan Buddhism and bring in their place Christian doctrine, and good government.” A similar take is articulated a few months later in the WCMN by China Inland Missionary Robert Ekvall (1883-1947), 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. Further, according to Cunningham, in contrast to the superstitious lamas of Tibetan Buddhism, the Chinese officials modeled modern secular authority. He noted, for instance, the “entire absence of all falsehood, . . . not a single stick of incense” when Chinese authorities established government offices in the region. This, he concluded, “is the virtue of a Chinese government: . . . to advance until another nation takes the reins and opens them up to the modern world.” Ekvall believed that the Tibetans were a “lawless, semisavage people” who managed themselves favorably to the less civilized, in his estimation, Pacific Islanders and Australian Aborigines. Nevertheless, he also believed that Chinese civilization, such as it was, was only barely held together by a destitute theocracy, ruled by abusive priests and magicians. Cunningham, Ekvall concludes his essay with this: “No land may shut her doors and live for herself. Man must free himself from fortresses and backwaters. They must profit by other controls and be guided by customs and laws which have met with universal approval. No nation is free to remain backward, and Tibet will not be neglected.” After considering several candidates to do the Chinese missionization, Cunningham suggests that the Chinese, and in particular the Paro Monastery, were able to make the “enlightened world” more interesting and useful, due partly to the existence of “Lamasim.” Ekvall is quieter always and will always staunchly resist Christianity, whereas Chinese missionaries are relatively open-minded. As such, he concludes, missionaries should count themselves fortunate that “more than half of Tibetans are still not directly under the Lhasa hierarchy.”

Reaching Tibet

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 also established government offices in the region. The first significant mention of Tibet in the JWCBRS occurred in 1931, a paper by the society’s founder, A.J. Simpson. The JWCBRS articulated the Society’s goal: “to provide a good example of the thinking on Christian and Missionary Alliance, a father and son working as missionaries in the region, perhaps of wider import, in terms of influence, were the books written by two missionaries in eastern Tibet. 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 (1917-1983) and Robert Ekvall (1899-1983), 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 “burned to the ground,” thus putting a target on it for Alliance missionaries. David Ekvall was one of the first to respond to this challenge in his book, published in 1933, a father and son working as missionaries in eastern Tibet. This book was “Geographic Control and Human Reactions in Sichuan,” a father and son working as missionaries in eastern Tibet. In his book, David Ekvall wrote, “Tibetans, nine things, one is not only a current saying, but one pregnant with truth. In this chapter, I shall explain this as ‘semi-savages’ when contrasted with the ‘decrepit’ Chinese, but he saved particular scorn for the ‘filthy,粿ourish, and unclean’ inhabitants of the Labrang monastery: “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 Taotshau in Gansu as “a city where Chinese culture and learning, Moslem knavery and trading ability, and Tibetan wildness were
It gives 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 Anglicophones 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 Anglicophones 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 admitted to taking some amount of inspiration from foreign 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 educators 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." 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. 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. It would be a great exaggeration (and Eurocentric and ahistorical) to say that Anglicophone Protestant missionaries were somehow responsible for early-20th-century Chinese nationalistic views of Tibet. Nonetheless, it is probably not too far off to say 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 nationalistic) vis-a-vis primitive Tibet, and they, in turn, inspired Chinese colleagues.

Anglicophone 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 Anglicophone 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 advancement of the missionary project in the region. One way of looking at it might be to admit that the "Pedagogy of Imperialism" 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.

Notes
2. Beauman, W. "Tsich舱nien Notes" WCMN (Nov. 1933).
5. Another article, Cunningham suggested that many of the Chinese troops were in fact "enquirers" from Changjiang's churches. Cunningham, R. WCMN (Sept. 1911).