

The West China Missionary News and Its Tibet Narrative

Yaling Zhu

Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

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Abstract: Founded in Sichuan at the end of the 19th century, The West China Missionary News is not only the first English newspaper in southwest China, but also the longest running journal in the modern history of Sichuan. Although the journal is a Christian reading material founded by western missionaries, it has comprehensive characteristics in content. In the course of nearly half a century, more than 200 Tibet-related reports had been published, covering the natural landscape, religious culture, local customs, language and customs of Tibetan areas, which are valuable first-hand historical materials for the study of Tibetology and related disciplines.

1. Introduction

With the rise of overseas evangelism of Protestantism in the 19th century, protestant missionaries from Europe and America came to China one after another. One of the important features of their missionary methods differs from that of early missionaries was that they took the establishment of newspapers and periodicals as a new medium and means of media. In 1815, Robert Morrison and William Milne founded the first Chinese-language newspaper, *Chinese Monthly Magazine* in Malacca, preaching religion, introducing news and new knowledge. After the Opium War, with the successive opening of commercial ports, Shanghai began to rise as a new economic center. In 1850, Britain founded the first English newspaper in Shanghai, *North China Herald*. In 1872, *Shenbao* was founded, which hired Chinese people to write articles. It opened a new era for Chinese newspapers. Until the end of the 19th century, westerners founded nearly 200 Chinese and foreign newspapers and periodicals in China, accounting for more than 80% of the total number of Chinese newspapers and periodicals at that time. One of these types of newspapers was unique in that it promoted missionary work and aimed to convey work information and exchange of ideas. It was issued to missionaries, foreigners in China, and readers interested in China. *The West China Missionary News*, founded in Sichuan, was a typical representative of this type of English-language publications.

The establishment of *The West China Missionary News* dates back to the second half of the 19th century. With the successive signing of *Tianjin Treaty* and *Beijing Treaty*, China's vast inland has also become a space for Christian mission activities. In 1866, Griffith John of the London Society of England and Alexander Wylie of the Holy Bible Society of England visited Sichuan, marking the beginning of Protestant missionary activities. In 1877, British missionary John McCathy came to Chongqing to establish the first missionary site of Protestant missionaries in Sichuan. Since then, Christian missions such as the British American Church in Canada, the Anglican Church of the United Kingdom, the American Baptist Church, and the Chinese Mainland Church had successively rented land to build houses and started their businesses. Due to the vast area and inconvenient transportation in this area, the missionaries were scattered everywhere. It was difficult to communicate with each other and coordinate with their work. They urgently needed an effective way to solve the problem. In addition, after the entry of the Christian church into Sichuan, repeated preaching, looting believers and other incidents occurred frequently, causing serious internal strife, which was not conducive to unity. In 1899, in order to eliminate misunderstanding and promote communication, 72 missionaries and 4 visitors scattered all over Sichuan gathered in Chongqing to hold the first west China missionary conference, referred to as "Chongqing Conference". After much discussion, the meeting decided on three important issues. First, the mission areas of different missions should be clearly divided to adjust the scattered and disordered mission state. Second, An

Advisory Board for West China was established to coordinate the relations between different committees. Third, *The West China Missionary News* was founded to expand the channels of information communication.

The West China Missionary News was first published in Chongqing in 1899. Due to limited conditions, the earliest issues were poor-quality manuscripts, but soon the situation was opened and the version upgraded to clear and stereotype prints. In 1900, the missionary work in West China encountered a serious crisis. A large number of missionaries were forced to flee to the east due to the impact of the Boxer Movement and the province's religion case. The publishing house also had to relocate to Shanghai in August of the same year, and did not return to Chongqing again until half a year later. In 1907, Chengdu began to develop into a mission center in western China. The publications moved from Chongqing to Chengdu, and were printed by The Canadian Mission Press. From its inception to its suspension in 1943, the publication was distributed in Chengdu for 37 years. It is not only the first publication of Christianity in the Southwest, but also the longest published period in the history of Sichuan journalism.

The West China Missionary News is an internal Christian publication “for the missionaries, about missionaries and written by the missionaries themselves.” During the publishing process of nearly half a century, the journal has long adhered to the purpose of “strengthening cooperation and exchanging information”. As an English newspaper, its chief editor and manager were always held by foreign missionaries, and most of its contributors were from the west. It was not until later that a few Chinese Christians like Shaoquan Yang participated in editing and writing articles. The purpose of *The West China Missionary News* was typical of internal communication, which resulted in the relatively “monopoly” nature of its language. Its readers were limited minorities. Although this limited the development space and social influence of the publication, but in a sense, it ensured the authenticity of discourse, and enhanced the value of historical materials.

As a religious English monthly, *The West China Missionary News* mainly aimed at Christian missionaries in China and westerners abroad. It has a subscription office overseas, where readers in the UK, US, Canada and other countries can order magazines through a subscription shop in Los Angeles. In terms of the number of publications, about half were in China and half were in overseas markets, so the overseas and domestic readership is roughly evenly split. The highest circulation of it in history was around 450 books, usually maintaining more than 400 books. Taking 1937 as an example, the exact number of subscribers to it was 424. There were 195 subscribers across China, accounting for 46% of the total number of subscribers. The number of subscribers in the United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia was as high as 229, accounting for the total number of subscribers 54%. After 1938, the Japanese army invaded China, many missionaries in China and their foreign churches were severed by the war. *The West China Missionary News* lost overseas subscribers and fund donations, and its financial revenue decreased sharply. As China's domestic economy deteriorated and prices skyrocketed, West China Church News eventually could no longer afford the huge cost of paper and printing, and was unfortunately forced to suspend publication in December 1943.

In the setting column of *The West China Missionary News*, each volume usually had a fixed topic for publishing notes from various places. In order to obtain first-hand information from various regions easily, the magazine appointed missionaries from local stations as sub-editors and correspondent at the very beginning of its establishment. Since 1900, there had been several editors in charge of culture and education, language and writing, youth work, women's work, medicine and health, Sunday school, missionary and other specific columns. *The West China Missionary News* not only published the investigation reports, conference decisions, and missionary news of the west China missions, but also reported on the specific ministries of establishing education, setting up hospitals, and engaging in social relief in Sichuan. Policy and other issues, and expressed the willingness of the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. As the people of the editorial office said in a letter to the west China advisory department, “In the future, some diligent and persistent historical researchers will obtain the original information on the development of Christianity in west China through *The West China Missionary News*.”

2. The Tibet Narrative and Its Historical Value of the West China Missionary News

As there were still a large number of ethnic minorities living in west China except Han ethnic group, its publications couldn't be separated from the special environment of multi-ethnic groups, so it was deeply immersed in regional culture. On the whole, *The West China Missionary News* focused on the activities of modern Protestant missionaries in the West China region and reported on the situation of various missions. However, there were also a lot of articles introducing secular society, so the content covered by the publication had comprehensive characteristics. In 1977, Yale University Theological Seminary reprinted the collected *The West China Missionary News* into a microfilm, and its organizers introduced the comprehensive features of the magazine:

The magazine has a unique perspective on the customs and social life of Sichuan in the early 20th century. It also includes articles and reports related to neighboring areas such as Tibet, Guizhou and Yunnan. For example, in 1911, John R. Muir's *Walking on the Tibetan Border* was a valuable geographical expedition covering the Tibetan region. ... In 1911, the Great Revolution that ended the Manchu empire spread to Sichuan, and the missionaries who witnessed the great changes of the times recorded what they saw and heard. In addition, in some cities where no war broke out, such as Lhasa and Guiyang, the discussions of the missionaries also provided valuable reports.

It can be seen that such reports not only have provided historical materials for the study of the western people's observation and understanding of the Tibetan society at that time, but also have provided a perspective different from that of Chinese recorders, so that today's scholars can transcend the limitations of observation and knowledge of Chinese historical recorders to understand the history objectively and comprehensively.

In fact, although *The West China Missionary News* is a missionary publication, in the long process of running the magazine, many articles about social life in West China were published, including a considerable number of articles about Tibet that concern the Tibetan areas. This part of the article involves religious practices, political economy, human geography, local customs, and social customs in Tibetan areas. Although they don't account for a large proportion of the entire magazine articles, the overall number is also considerable. The missionaries introduced the magical scenery of the mountains and rivers in Tibet through travel notes and field trip records, and described the strange customs, long history and distant legends of the Tibetans, including clothing, food, housing, transportation, marriage, funeral and other aspects of life customs and their language, culture, religious beliefs, physical conditions. These Tibetan-related articles were rich in content, wide in scope, and comprehensive in reporting. They outlined a vivid picture of the Tibetan region with a unique perspective. In a sense, they made up for the lack of Chinese literature in the same period and were of great historical value.

For 42 years, from the first Tibetan-related article in 1901 to the last in 1942, more than 260 articles in total were published, which could be divided into 23 categories. They are: General reports, news reports, travel journals, religion, geography, natural history, communications, borderland studies, people, medicine, politics, history, transportation, editorials, animals, education, poetry, book reviews, females, linguistics, plants, maxims and architecture. According to statistics, the top five themes are general reports, news reports, travel journals, religion and geography, accounting for 22.2%, 21.4%, 10.9%, 9.7%, 5.6% of the total number of articles. The rankings that followed are natural history, communications, borderland studies, people, medicine, politics, history, transportation, editorials, animals, education, poetry, book reviews, females, linguistics, plants, maxims, and architecture. Strictly speaking, considering the factors of overlap and omission, this subject classification method is neither perfect nor thorough. For example, general reports and travelling journals often cover history, geography, religion, transportation, architecture, etc.; Natural history usually involves animals and plants in nature; Articles about Tibetan nuns and their temples can be divided into the female theme or religion theme. It is necessary to roughly classify the contents of each article according to the focus of the article and the author's self-designed topic. Although it cannot cover everything and be perfect, it can at least provide data reference for further analysis and research.

Writers to Tibetan articles on *The West China Missionary News*, with the exception of a few

anonymous authors, were mostly western missionaries who were active in the Tibet area of China at the time. Of the more than 260 articles, only one was written by a Chinese author. This is because of the nature of internal communication in the journal and the generally low level of English writing of Chinese Christians at that time. In terms of the length of the works, the length of the articles involved in Tibet varies greatly. Some columns directly focus on a particular aspect of Tibetan society, with detailed descriptions and thorough analysis, covering dozens of pages. Other non-column articles, however, are only indirectly related to some conditions in Tibetan areas, which are only briefly introduced with limited space and few words. Although both are Tibet-related articles, the former and the latter have very different values in Tibetan studies.

During the 45 years from 1899 to 1943, the journal was published in an eventful period when the Chinese society was in great turmoil and the world pattern was undergoing great changes. Therefore, the fluctuation of the number of articles involved in the collection also directly reflected the influence of the turbulent times. In the early days of the publication, due to the impact of the Boxer Movement and the province's religion case in Sichuan Province, in 1900, the West China missionaries were forced to flee to the eastern coast. The publishing house had to be moved from Chongqing to Shanghai, returned to Chongqing half a year later, and moved to Chengdu in 1907. From the founding of the journal in 1899 to the publishing house's relocation to Chengdu in 1907, there were very few Tibet-related articles published, only 4 articles in 8 years. From 1907, when the publication was changed to be printed by the Huaying Book Company, until the year before the publication was suspended in 1943, the articles about Tibet were published every year. There was no interruption. For example, in 1911, as a large number of missionaries entered the eastern Tibetan area, the number of Tibet-related articles exceeded 10 for the first time. There were 15 in total; From 1922 to 1924, because the West China Borderland Research Society was established in Chengdu, the Tibetan science research activities carried out by the members increased, the number of articles ushered in the second climax in history with more than 10 articles each year; From 1934 to 1940, the number of articles continued to stabilize at the level of more than 10 articles per year. Later, due to the factors such as the impact of the continuous war and financial difficulties, the number of published articles gradually decreased. Until 1943, it was forced to stop publication.

It is worth mentioning that the Tibet-related articles of *The West China Missionary News* have the following four distinctive features in terms of language expression: First, most of the articles are on-site reports from missionaries as inspectors and parties. They recorded what westerners saw and heard in the Tibetan area in modern times. All the articles are first-hand materials; Second, the views and opinions of some articles on specific events are inconsistent with the descriptions of the Chinese or Tibetan historical materials at that time, providing a very good objective reference for historical research; Third, some historical events and social details reported in some articles are rare and precious materials which are blind spots for the historical materials recorded in Chinese or Tibetan; Fourth, the systematicity and continuity of special reports in English magazines is a traditional advantage of western media, which is not available in most Chinese periodicals of the same period.

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