

Missionary archaeology on Republican China's southwestern frontier

Protestant missionaries played important roles in the transfer, alteration and creation of academic disciplines between China and the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This essay considers the work of three missionaries instrumental in the development of the modern discipline of archaeology in early twentieth century Sichuan province. It highlights the importance, but also the ambiguities of their work, caught as they were between amateur and professional, and imperialist and nationalist.

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IN APRIL 1933, two protestant missionaries were arrested and brought before the magistrate of Pengshan County, Sichuan, charged by the Jiangkou village headman with grave robbing along the Min River. The magistrate, sensitive to the possible international complexities of the case, sent the pair back to Chengdu with no punishment other than the confiscation of the excavated artifacts and their archaeological tools. Letters of accusation and counter-accusation briefly circulated between the missionaries, the magistrate, regional warlord Liu Wenhui, and the British and American consulates, but ultimately no resolution was reached.¹ The case could easily be construed as an example of missionaries as 'cultural imperialists', converting the Chinese to Western religion and stealing national treasures along the way. Conversely, their actions might also be thought of as part of a modernizing and nation-building process, where tombs are no-longer sacred spaces, but are bearers of national history, requiring scientific excavation and their contents to be moved to sanctioned museums. Scholars have used both paradigms to describe the activities of the missionary archaeologists discussed below: James Huston Edgar, Thomas Torrance, and David Crockett Graham (the latter two being the arrestees at Pengshan). However, as will be seen, none are so easily categorized, blending their Christian mission with archaeological work in distinct ways.

James Huston Edgar and the Tibetan paleolithic

James Huston Edgar (1872-1936) was born in Australia but moved to New Zealand at a young age. Edgar was endowed with a natural curiosity and delight in adventure, so much so that as a youth he ran away from home and joined a tribe of Maori (despite being "a blood relation of Thomas Carlyle," his eulogist noted). In 1897, Edgar enrolled for a year of study at the Missionary Training Home in Adelaide, and upon graduation joined the China Inland Mission, with the understanding that he would eventually work at a mission station in western Sichuan, near Tibet, an area into which the mission was looking to expand. After four years learning Chinese in eastern China, Edgar arrived in Sichuan in 1902, where he remained until his death in 1936.²

Edgar had no training in archaeological theory or method, and was more a dabbler than a professional; but being so naturally curious about the history of the region, and being one of the few English-speaking residents in the borderlands, he accrued some level of authority on the subject. Edgar's archaeology of the region took him in many directions, but his most persistent efforts were aimed toward collecting what he determined to be paleolithic and neolithic artifacts, such as chipped or polished stone tools and bones. The primary outlet for his archaeological research was the *Journal of the West China Border Research Society*. In his initial archaeological offerings to the *Journal*, Edgar emphasized connections between stone implements of the frontier with China's Central Plains, so suggesting the notion, popular with Chinese nationalists at the time, that development had come to this peripheral region from the heart of China, and that there was, therefore, no independent civilization in the region in antiquity. However, the longer Edgar remained a resident of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, the more he came to believe that the artifacts he collected indicated independent human development in the region, and he began referring to the stone tools' creators as "pre-Tibetans", discounting connections with China.³ Edgar became so convinced, in fact, that he was bothered by all the attention given to the "advanced character" of the stone tools attributed to Peking Man, advertised as the ancestor of the Chinese, once writing to his friend: "If our Tibetan ones [artifacts] are not of the same kind—perhaps even more ancient!—I shall spend some labor eating my hat."⁴ Ultimately, however, except for a few missionary friends (and perhaps Swiss geologist Arnold Heim), few were persuaded of this Tibet-centered archaeology.

Thomas Torrance and a lost tribe of Israel

Thomas Torrance (1871-1959) was born in a small village in Lanarkshire, Scotland, the same county that was home to an early inspiration for the young Torrance, David Livingstone. Torrance joined the China Inland Mission in 1895 and was sent for one year of Chinese language training in Shanghai, before moving to the China Inland Mission station in Chengdu. In 1910, after a falling out with some others at the mission, over whether or not there was a place for education and not just preaching in the mission program (Torrance said there was), he switched mission boards, affiliating with the American Bible Society, who kept him on in Chengdu. Torrance remained in Chengdu until his retirement in 1934, spending much of the last decade evangelizing in remote areas, most notably in northwestern Sichuan, the area inhabited by the ethnic Qiang people.⁵

Torrance combined a fervent evangelical missionary sensibility with a love of the past, believing that to more readily convert a people, one must know their history. Like Edgar, he was decidedly an amateur when it came to archaeology, but also like Edgar, he was one of the very few even attempting it in the region, and so became known as a specialist, and was awarded membership in the Royal Geographical Society despite his lack of training. At first, his archaeology focused on excavating Han Dynasty tombs (recall his arrest), the results of which he tried to use in his evangelism as proof that pre-Buddhist Confucian China was close to God.⁶ Over time, Torrance came to believe that Buddhism had so corrupted the Chinese that God had sent a tribe of Israel to try to awaken the Chinese to his truth; that tribe, Torrance said, was known in China as the Qiang. His archaeological findings in the Qiang region of northwestern Sichuan became pieces in his overall case for the Qiang as a lost tribe of Israel. He attempted to show that the pottery excavated from Qiang area tombs bore (in his estimation) striking resemblance to pottery from the Levant.⁷ Torrance's Jerusalem-centered theories garnered even less support from the archaeological community than did Edgar's.

David Crockett Graham and the Chinese nation

Of the three missionaries discussed here, American Baptist David Crockett Graham (1884-1961) did the most to establish disciplinary archaeology in the region and to focus the new discipline squarely on the Chinese nation. Graham spent most of his earlier life in Walla Walla, Washington, including his college years at Whitman College. After college, he studied at Rochester Theological Seminary (New York) before joining the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and heading for China in 1911. After just one year of Chinese language training in Shanghai, Graham moved to Yibin, Sichuan, where he remained at the Baptist mission until 1930. In 1930, he left Yibin for a position in Chengdu, teaching anthropology and curating the archaeological and ethnographic museum at the Protestant college, West China Union University. He would remain in Chengdu until his retirement in 1948.⁸

Before moving into his new position, Graham spent a year and a half studying archaeology at the University of Chicago and Harvard, so that when he returned to southwest China, he brought a new level of professionalization to the region. His first major excavation occurred in 1932-33 when, with the support of the Sichuan Provincial Education Office, Graham took control of a large-scale excavation in Guanghan. The majority of the artifacts from that excavation, including large jade discs, jade beads, and pottery, were displayed in the West China Union University Museum. Graham determined that the material dated to the early Western Zhou dynasty (1027-771 BCE) and was stylistically much the same as the material that had been discovered around the Yellow River, thus proving (contrary to Edgar and Torrance) that a process



Above: The Executive Committee of the West China Border Research Society in Chengdu, 1935, including Graham (standing, far left) and Edgar (standing, center). Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library.

of diffusion had brought the higher culture of the Central Plains to Sichuan, which was a periphery. The discovery was heralded in archaeological circles in China and the West as showing China's long presence in the area.⁹ Graham's fame thus established, he continued to excavate around Sichuan province in the 1930s and into the 1940s, usually offering interpretations of his findings that implicitly highlighted Chinese civilizational superiority over smaller people groups in the region, like the Qiang and the Tibetans.¹⁰

Conclusion

Japan's invasion of China in 1937 resulted in a massive movement of people from the occupied areas in eastern China into Sichuan. Included among the refugees were well-trained Chinese archaeologists. The position of the missionary archaeologists necessarily decreased in the face of the higher level of professionalization and the Chinese nationalist credentials of these scholars. Still, the missionary archaeologists detailed here had made their mark. Many of the sites Edgar, Torrance and Graham pioneered continued to attract the attention of Sichuan-based archaeologists for years to come. Most famously, the Guanghan site is now known for yielding remains of the highly distinctive (non-Central Plains) Sanxingdui culture. Leaving aside their value to the history of archaeology in China, the missionaries here also suggest something of the problem of a too cavalier dismissal of missionaries as imperialists. One must ask, and answer with nuance, 'whose imperialists?'

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Notes

- 1 The letters related to this incident are available in the Sichuan Provincial Archives, Record Unit 41, File 691.
- 2 Edgar's biographical information is drawn from the eulogy by D.S. Dye. 1936. 'James Huston Edgar, Pioneer', *Journal of the West China Border Research Society* 8:14-18.
- 3 See any number of Edgar's articles in the early 1930s editions of the *JWCBRS*; especially, 'Prehistoric Remains in Hsi-Kang or Eastern Tibet', *JWCBRS* VI:56-61.
- 4 Letter, Edgar to Leslie Kilborn, n.d., Sichuan University Museum Library.
- 5 This information about his life is culled from a biography of Torrance's more famous son, the theologian, Thomas F. Torrance. Alister E. McGrath. 1999. *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, pp.6-16.
- 6 For instance, Thomas Torrance. 1910. 'Burial Customs in Sz-chuan', *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 41:57-75.
- 7 Thomas Torrance. 1937. *China's First Missionaries: Ancient 'Israelites'*, London: Thynne and Company.
- 8 On Graham's life, see Charles F. McKhann and Alan Waxman, 'David Crockett Graham: American Missionary/Scientist/Explorer in Sichuan, 1911-1948', in Denise M. Glover et al. (eds.) 2012. *Explorers and Scientists in China's Borderlands, 1880-1950*, Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- 9 This description is based on Graham. 1933-1934. 'A Preliminary Report of the Hanchow Excavation', *JWCBRS* VI:114-131.
- 10 Graham. 1944. 'An Archaeological Find in the Ch'iang Region', *JWCBRS* XV(Series A):34-38.

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