

The Missionary Roots of Nationalism: Evidence from China

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What explains the origins of nationalism? In this article, we trace the origins of an important early twentieth-century nationalist movement to Christian missionary activity. A growing literature credits missionaries with spreading schooling and democracy. Yet missionary activity often led to a political backlash and to antifeign, nationalist mobilization. Drawing on evidence from China, we show how missionary activity sparked nationalist mobilization in the early 1900s. We gather new data on early nationalist secret societies, missionary activity, and antimissionary violence. Qualitative and quantitative evidence shows how missionaries threatened the political power of local elites, who responded by mobilizing violent anti-foreign protests and participating in nationalist political societies. The findings challenge the idea that Christian missionaries influenced long-run political development primarily because they spread schooling and literacy. Instead, we show that missionaries also sparked early nationalist mobilization.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalist rebellions toppled empires and colonial regimes from Nigeria to China to Venezuela. What accounts for the origins of these nationalist movements? The conventional wisdom credits domestic social and political changes. The growth of print media (Anderson 1983), economic modernization (Gellner 1983; Hroch 2000), political reform (Bai and Jia 2016), and state schooling (Tilly 1994; Weber 1976) contributed to the spread of nationalist ideas and, in some cases, led to nationalist mobilization.

In this article, by contrast, we trace the origins of nationalist movements to a foreign threat: Christian missionary activity. By the end of the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries had spread to practically every corner of the globe. Missionaries in 1900 had evangelized over 700 million people, approaching half the world population (see Johnson and Zurlo 2007). A growing literature has sought to understand the consequences of missionary activity, finding that Christian missionaries encouraged education, newspaper reading, and a robust civil society, and in doing so they strengthened the prospects for democracy and economic growth (Ace-

moglu, Gallego, and Robinson 2014; Bai and Kung 2015; Lankina and Getachew 2012; Nunn 2010; Valencia Caicedo 2018; Wantchekon, Klačnja, and Novta 2015; Woodberry 2012).

Yet missionary activity often led to a political backlash—fueling nationalist mobilization against colonial and imperial powers. Notable examples of nationalist groups created at least partly in reaction against missionary activity include the Nigerian National Democratic Party, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Mau Mau rebels in Kenya, and the Indian rebels of 1857. Numerous historians have written about how missionary activity generated anger among local elites, who led nationalist, anticolonial political mobilizations (see, among many others, Coleman 1963, 105–8; Sharkey 2013, 106–8; Zheng 2018, 42–44). However, most social science theorizing about the impact of missionaries has ignored the role of this backlash.

We focus in this article on explaining participation in nationalist organizations that played a key role in the Chinese revolution of 1911, which toppled China’s last imperial dynasty, the Qing. The revolution is the subject of an important debate. One strain of scholarship argues that the revolution

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was the product of the defection of local elites (Bai and Jia 2016; Moore 1966). Another perspective argues that the threat of foreign invasion destabilized the Qing (Skocpol 1979). Our argument builds on both perspectives, arguing that one key but frequently ignored factor that led nationalist mobilization and revolution was the spread of missionary activity to the interior of China. Qualitative archival evidence illustrates how missionary activity undermined the material, political, and moral authority of local elites. In response, local elites rallied their communities in violent conflicts against missionaries. When the imperial government refused to support local elites' protests against missionary intrusion, local elites organized nationalist secret societies dedicated to overthrowing the Qing.

To make our case, we draw on extensive new quantitative and qualitative data. First, we draw on firsthand qualitative accounts from historical archives. This archival material helps us to trace in fine-grained detail how missionary contact evolved into antimissionary violence and, finally, mobilization into nationalist organizations. Next, we construct a new data set that documents participation in the Tongmenghui (同盟會), the primary nationalist secret society of the late Qing. Our effort builds on important work by Bai and Jia (2016). However, as we show, the data used by Bai and Jia (2016) are incomplete.¹ We collect a complete data set of nationalist secret society members. We also code the location of antimissionary incidents throughout China, to our knowledge the first quantitative data set of this kind. We also gather georeferenced information on the content of books, on the spread of newspapers, and on the growth of the Chinese railway system.

Our quantitative and qualitative evidence shows how missionary contact sparked antimissionary violence and, subsequently, nationalist mobilization. Our research design leverages early steps by the China Inland Mission to proselytize in the interior of China. Qualitative evidence and placebo tests show that missionaries lacked accurate information about local conditions, and entry in the early period of missionary activity was haphazard. We find that prefectures with an early mission station were 34% more likely to experience antimissionary violence and 31% more likely to produce a member of a nationalist revolutionary society. While several other factors, such as the abolition of the imperial exam, as Bai and Jia (2016) argue, also contributed to nationalist mobilization in China, the unique role of missionaries has not been explored in nearly as much detail.

We make two central contributions in this article. First, we show how foreign missionary activity contributed to na-

1. Their work misses 18% of prefectures that had participants in the Tongmenghui.

tionalist mobilization. Classic theories have most often linked the rise of nationalist mobilization to domestic political factors such as the rise of print media (Anderson 1983) or state reforms (Lawrence 2013; Tilly 1994; Weber 1976). Scholarship that examines foreign sources of the origins of nationalism outside of Western Europe have generally focused on war (Johnson 1962; Skocpol 1979; Wimmer and Feinstein 2010).² We do not dispute the importance of these other factors. However, our focus on the role of missionary contact provides an alternate channel through which foreign imperialism may have sparked nationalist mobilization.

Second, our findings challenge the prevailing wisdom about the role of missionaries in political development. The dominant view, especially in the quantitative political economy literature, is that Christian missions were important for later political development primarily because they spread literacy, schooling, liberal ideas, and civil society (Acemoglu et al. 2014; Bai and Kung 2015; Valencia Caicedo 2018; Woodberry 2012). We argue that missionary activity led to conflict between missionaries and local elites, who recognized missionaries as a threat to their political power.³ We also build on recent work showing that the spread of Protestantism is a stimulant for political participation among believers (Hong and Paik 2021; McClendon and Riedl 2015, 2019; Sperber and Hern 2018). Our findings suggest that the spread of religion can lead to a backlash among nonbelievers, especially when the spread of religion curbs the power of local elites (Koesel 2014; Nielsen 2017).

THE RISE OF NATIONALIST REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS

The main outcome we examine in the article is nationalist mobilization. We focus specifically on participation in the Tongmenghui in China, the largest and most important nationalist organization in China in the lead-up to the 1911 revolution. The Tongmenghui was founded in 1905 by Sun Yat-Sen, who knit together several competing revolutionary secret societies. Following the revolution, the Tongmenghui formed the nucleus of the Guomindang, or Nationalist Party, which would rule China in the Republican Era (1927–49).

2. Others, notably Beissinger (2002), have examined the role of transnational forces in contemporary nationalist mobilization. By contrast, we focus here on the early spread of nationalism in one more populated country, China.

3. Our findings are consistent in their broad themes with a recent literature from Latin America that shows how Christian missions and churches undermined secular authority and mobilized indigenous populations (Rink 2018; Trejo 2009). However, outside of Latin America it was arguably often backlash among nonbelievers and apostates, not the behavior of the converted, that drove political mobilization. For colonial empires in Asia more broadly, see among others recent work by Hong and Paik (2018) and Kim (2020).

The ideology of the Tongmenghui was central to its appeal. The central goals of the society were the overthrow of the Manchu-led Qing Empire, the establishment of a Chinese nation-state, and the revival of China. Importantly, as we will discuss in more detail, the formal ideology of the Tongmenghui and especially of the later Nationalist Party was not explicitly antforeign. However, many of its members were drawn from the same strata of disaffected local elite who reacted violently against the incursion of foreign missionaries into the interior of China.

Intraelite conflict did play a central role in the emergence of nationalist and anti-Qing organizations. The conventional historiography emphasizes the roots of the revolution in the Taiping Rebellion. To quash the Taiping Rebellion, a weakened Qing Empire allowed the local gentry to arm themselves and form militias, throwing the balance of coercive power toward local elites (Dincecco and Wang 2020; Fairbank and Goldman 2006).

Bai and Jia (2016) credit the abolition of the imperial exam in 1905—which was the main channel of political recruitment into the state—with sparking the revolution. They specifically argue that the abolition of the exam caused individuals to join the Tongmenghui. We concur with the larger argument made by Bai and Jia (2016) that the abolition of the exam was an important grievance. However, the abolition of the exam in 1905 cannot fully explain the emergence the Tongmenghui and other revolutionary groups, whose members were radicalized years before.

We argue that the emergence of nationalist organizations can be traced in part to earlier grievances about foreign intrusion in China—especially widespread backlash against missionary activity. Missionaries in China and elsewhere have been seen by some scholars as liberalizing forces, especially in contrast to colonial and imperial governments. Woodberry (2012) prominently argues that “conversionary Protestants” helped to spread education, printing, newspapers, civil society organizations, and liberal reforms, and in doing so they spurred the rise of liberal democracy in the long run. Findings from India, China, and South Africa support the claim that missionaries were effective at spreading education and literacy (Bai and Kung 2015; Lankina and Getachew 2012; Valencia Caicedo 2018).

Yet while missionary attempts to promote education and literacy are generally cast in a positive light in the existing literature, they also served colonial interests by spreading ideologies that legitimated imperialism. In Egypt, for example, Mitchell writes of how missionary education led some local intellectuals to “believe the only way to rival the West was to learn from it and for this and other reasons preferred European colonialism to local Turkish rule” (1991, 168).

Moreover, missionary activity generated political conflict with local elites. In much of Africa, for example, missionary activity directly undermined local chiefs. As missionaries attacked long-standing social structures, they sparked a nationalist backlash among nonbelievers. Coleman notes that in Nigeria “it was the failure rather than the achievement of [the] missionary endeavor” that was of most political consequence: “it was among the apostates, the near-converts, and the many Africans exposed but unconverted to Christianity” that “bitter” anger and a sense of nationalism arose (1963, 105). Western religious leaders were well aware of the backlash that missionaries created. As a statement from the International Missionary Council noted, “to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the beliefs, the customs . . . [and] the social structures” of indigenous communities (97).⁴

The rise of anticolonial organizations in Egypt provides an example of how missionary activity threatened local elite power and led to nationalist mobilization. In the 1920s and 1930s, “an upsurge in anti-missionary rhetoric . . . accompanied and spurred the emergence of new forms of Muslim social activism,” especially nationalists and nationalist organizations (Sharkey 2013, 104–50). The most prominent example of such an organization may be the Muslim Brotherhood. As a teenager, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, saw firsthand the rise of Christian missionary activity when an American Presbyterian mission came to evangelize in his hometown. His outraged response was to create a “reformist society” that, he later wrote in his memoirs, “waged a meritorious combat against [the missionaries’] message” (quoted on 107) and served as a predecessor to the Muslim Brotherhood. Later, the Muslim Brotherhood, like other Egyptian groups of the era, would make opposition to missionary activity a central part of its message (Sharkey 2013).

In China, missionaries spread deep into the interior but failed to gain many converts. Before the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries were generally forbidden from traveling outside of a few ports, although there were cases in which missionaries did so anyway. The agreements imposed on China at the end of the Second Opium War in 1860 opened up the interior of China to large numbers of Protestant missionaries for the first time. By 1922, over 90% of counties had a record of some kind of missionary presence, and there were some 10,000 pastors spread across China (Stauffer 1922). Yet missionaries had gained an exceedingly small number of followers: just under half a million, or 0.1% of the population.

4. One nineteenth-century British prime minister quipped that a missionary is a “religious Englishman with a mission to offend the religious feelings of the natives” (Breuille 2013, 347).

Although missionaries failed to convert many people in China to Christianity, their behavior established them as important adversaries of local elites. Who were these elites? Membership in the gentry was generally gained by passing government exams (or by purchasing a degree). Passing the exam was a source of considerable prestige: the scholar-bureaucrat was a member of the literati, with the right to wear clothes that marked him as a degree holder and the right to be addressed with special honorifics. Passing the imperial exam also earned individuals special legal and economic rights, including the ability to intervene in legal cases on behalf of allies and clients.

Missionaries undermined the authority of local elites in crucial ways. First, and perhaps most provocatively, they intervened in legal court cases on behalf of converts, claiming that as converts they were not subject to local courts under the treaties forced on the Qing after the Opium Wars.⁵ Second, missionaries took land to build churches, undercutting local gentry's control over this important asset, which was the foundation of local patron-client ties. Third, they organized poverty relief projects that had traditionally fallen to the gentry and had helped strengthen the gentry's legitimacy (Cohen 1963; Thompson 1908).

Local elites responded to missionary threats by fanning antimissionary violence. They circulated anti-Christian pamphlets and posters that “contained lengthy recitals of the absurdities of the foreign religion and the perverse practices indulged in by its adherents, and it frequently concluded with a general call for action on the part of all loyal Chinese to protect China from degenerating into a land of beasts and barbarians” (Cohen 1963, 86–87). The charges levied against foreign missionaries were often inflammatory—for example, alleging cannibalism and human sacrifice—and sometimes ended with a calls to attack specific missions and individuals.

Historical accounts suggest a simple hypothesis. In regions of China where there is a foreign missionary presence, local elites will fan antiforeign, anti-Qing sentiment in order to drive out missionaries that threaten their power. These regions would then produce the leaders of early nationalist political organizations, who had been radicalized by their experience with missionaries. Our main hypothesis is that *regions with foreign missionary conflict will be more likely to produce found-*

ing members of nationalist political organizations. The following sections examine this proposition, first through a detailed case study that illustrates the basic logic of the hypothesis. We then turn to quantitative data from across China.

QUALITATIVE EVIDENCE FOR MISSIONARIES AND NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION

In this section, we draw on archival material to illustrate how missionary activity led to early nationalist mobilization in China. We focus specifically on a series of missionary incidents in the immediate vicinity of Chongqing, in what was then Sichuan Province.⁶ The Chongqing cases show how missionary activity generated grievances among local elites; how these elites responded by using emotive, antiforeign rhetoric to organize violent attacks on missions; and how this ultimately created a cadre of local notables who were among the earliest participants in China's nationalist movement.⁷

We focus on Sichuan because it was an important center of nationalist mobilization and because it has relatively abundant archival material. Sichuan produced 127 members of the Tongmenghui, making it a hotbed of nationalist activity; the regions in and around Chongqing produced an unusually large number of nationalist secret society members. In addition, Sichuan's provincial archive has accessible, compiled records of missionary cases, making it possible to trace in detail the evolution of local missionary cases.

Starting in the 1860s, missionary activity led to series of violent incidents in Chongqing and the surrounding towns, especially in nearby Ba County. In one of the first recorded antimissionary incidents in the region, in 1863, missionaries are alleged to have torn down a local temple and replaced it with a missionary residence. The destruction of this temple was a clear affront to the authority of local elites and to local religious practice, and residents reportedly responded by demolishing the missionary residence and rebuilding the temple.⁸ A similar incident in 1865, in which missionaries were alleged to have destroyed another temple in order to build a Christian church, stirred a riot in which residents destroyed a church.

Perhaps the most important violent incident of this early period happened in 1886, in response to a church-building project by Protestant missionaries. According to officials, “American [missionaries] acquired land [near the city] to build

5. Historically, the local gentry had used their authority to intervene in legal cases to help allies and clients. Under the Convention of Peking (1860), which was forced on the Qing after the Second Opium War, foreign missionaries enjoyed extraterritoriality and were exempt from local legal proceedings, and they sometimes used their authority to intervene in court cases. This directly undermined the gentry's political authority. It also meant that local churches tended to attract, among other converts, criminals who sought to evade prosecution (Zheng 2018, 42).

6. Today Chongqing has become its own province-level unit.

7. See an important book by Zheng (2018) for a description of missionary cases in Chongqing. Our account builds on Zheng's work with additional material.

8. See *Records of the Qing Dynasty Missionary Cases*, August 1863 (《清教案》, 同治二年八月二十一日), cited in Zhang and Liu (1987), 782.



Figure 1. Image from an antimissionary pamphlet from 1891 depicting a member of the local gentry class directing soldiers to behead missionaries (depicted as goats) and shoot Jesus (who is depicted as a pig). (Source: Yale University Library.)

churches, without regard to the thoughts of the people.”⁹ The prime location of the land acquired by the missionaries threatened the material basis of the local gentry’s authority, since control over land was an important source of the land-owning gentry’s power and, moreover, would give missionaries a more permanent foothold in the community. Members of the local gentry complained to the county magistrate about the project, but the magistrate, his hands tied by the imperial government, sided with the missionaries (Zhang and Liu 1987).

In response, local elites used several tactics to mobilize the community against this threat to their authority. To begin with, they distributed posters and pamphlets attacking the missionaries. We could not locate any of the posters or pamphlets from this specific incident, but the use of inflammatory posters and pamphlets to undermine missionaries was a common practice in China during this time period. Figure 1 shows a picture from a pamphlet distributed by a member of the local gentry in Hunan named Zhou Han. The image depicts a scholar-bureaucrat, a member of the local gentry, directing people to take revenge on missionaries. To underscore the antiforeign sentiment, the images of missionaries in this picture were de-

monized into monsters with a goat head and human body (in Chinese the pronunciation of the character 羊 [goat] is the same as character 洋, meaning “foreign” or “western”). Other images in the pamphlet show missionaries engaging in acts of extreme cruelty—such as gouging out the eyes of patients—calculated to inflame tensions among Chinese readers.

Using antiforeign propaganda similar to these pamphlets, elites successfully mobilized much of Chongqing against the missionaries. A key target of their mobilization were students. These students had gathered nearby to take the county-level imperial exam, the first step on the bureaucratic rung. On learning of Protestant missionary’s plan, they decided to boycott the exam and were joined in their strike by local merchants.¹⁰ They then, along with hundreds of other Chongqing residents, rioted and burned down missionary homes and churches.

The radicalization of the imperial exam takers represented an important moment in the growth of nationalist sentiment in Chongqing. Most were the children of local elites, with households wealthy enough to support them through the years of study needed for the exam. By definition, all were aspirants to the elite scholar-official class. The missionary tensions

9. Sichuan Province Archives, “Edict regarding the investigating and handling of the Chongqing missionary incident” (四川省案著,《四川教案与和拳案》, 查重教案上, 光十二年[1886年], 426).

10. See Sichuan Province Archives, Sichuan Missionary Cases and Boxer Rebellion Archive (四川省案著,《四川教案与和拳案》), 452–53.

highlighted for this important group of local elites the distinction between Chinese and Western, the threat of Western imperial powers, and the weakness of the Qing state.

Most of the participants in later nationalist organizations such as the Tongmenghui would have been children during this first large-scale incident in 1886, but repeated antimissionary incidents in Chongqing of a very similar character—in 1888, 1889, 1890, 1896, and 1896 (see Zhang and Liu 1987)—were among the most important political events in the region throughout the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the specific missionary incident described above contributed to the radicalization of one of the most famous members of the Tongmenghui, a military officer named Zhu De, who would later earn even greater fame as a Communist Party leader. Zhu told his biographer that he had been told starting as a young boy about the “arrogant and proud” missionaries “who had caused a rebellion in central [Sichuan] in the year [he] was born [1886]” (Smedley 1956, 22–23). Anger at missionaries was at the root of his political radicalization. When asked by his biographer why he did not go to a missionary school, Zhu “stared . . . in amazement” and said: “How could I? I was a patriot! The missionaries turned Chinese into political and cultural eunuchs who despised their own history and culture” (57). Zhu secretly joined the Tongmenghui and participated in the 1911 revolution on the side of the rebels.

Chongqing produced an usually large number of antimissionary incidents and large numbers of participants in nationalist groups like the Tongmenghui. Many of these Tongmenghui members would have witnessed the incidents throughout their teenage years, when exam takers, scholar-bureaucrats, and other local elites fanned the flames of antiforeign and anti-Qing sentiment. Quite possibly some participated in these incidents, although direct evidence of their participation in these riots is unlikely to exist.

The response of the Qing state was important to understanding the politics of missionary incidents and the rise of nationalism. The Qing state was caught between foreign powers who threatened to carve up China and local notables who were an important part of the ruling coalition. The Qing responded by attempting to placate both sides. By and large, as in the incident described above, it appears from qualitative case studies that the Qing most often responded by siding with missionaries and occasionally by violently repressing antimissionary protest. In some cases the Qing sided with protesters or at least did not take strong action supporting missionaries, but treaty obligations placed missionaries outside of the Qing justice system, which meant that in general the government was forced to allow missionary activity to continue.

Did the Qing court’s handling of local disputes influence the formation of anti-Qing nationalist organizations? Our

quantitative data set has only partial data on Qing responses to individual conflicts. The available data do not show any correlation between how the government handed local cases and later nationalist mobilization. This suggests that missionary activity initially generated antiforeign nationalism that targeted Western powers. Over time, however, as the weakness of the Qing response became evident, these missionary incidents did contribute to a shift in the political allegiances of the local gentry, causing a rift between local elites and the declining Qing state (Zheng 2018, 44).

QUANTITATIVE DATA

We now turn to quantitative evidence on the relationship between missionary activity and the rise of nationalist organizations in China. We first introduce our data set, which draws on an extensive new data-collection effort. We then test our main hypothesis using both ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions and an instrumental variables (IV) approach.

We build a prefecture-level data set that draws on new data from a wide range of sources. We collect data on 249 prefectures of 18 provinces located in the heart of China.¹¹ Prefectures are the administrative unit below the province but above the county level. The main outcome we examine is nationalist mobilization, specifically whether a prefecture produced a member of the Tongmenghui in its founding period of 1905–6. We draw on exhaustive rosters of members of the group.¹² These rosters include the names of participants, their county of origin, the date of recruitment, and, for some, the person who recruited them into the group. Our data are more complete than the other existing quantitative study on the emergence of revolutionary groups, an important paper by Bai and Jia (2016). By our calculations, Bai and Jia’s data miss a fifth of the prefectures that produced members of the Tongmenghui.¹³ We complement the data on the Tongmenghui with data from rosters of other early nationalist groups in this era.¹⁴

We also collect data on the number of antimissionary incidents in a prefecture before 1905.¹⁵ And we gather other data on missionary activity drawn from the records of the China

11. Our provinces include the main regions of what is sometimes referred to as “China Proper.” We drop frontier provinces including Xinjiang, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet that lack adequate data.

12. The source is the *Revolutionary Documents* collection (see CCRPA 1953).

13. Bai and Jia rely on a list compiled by Chang (1982), which is incomplete. Chang’s list includes information on the origins of 590 founding members of the Tongmenghui. Our roster includes information on the hometowns of 985 founding members. We believe the data we have collected are exhaustive.

14. These data are from Qing Revolutionary Groups (清季的革命团体) and Qing Constitutional Groups (清季的立宪团体) by Chang (1982).

15. This draws on Zhang (1987). Note that these cases exclude the Boxer Rebellion. We believe this to be the most complete available source,

Inland Mission, from gazetteers produced by county-level governments in early twentieth century, and a survey of missions by Stauffer (1922).

In addition, we gather data on a number of other important variables. We collect information on the number of newspapers in each prefecture in the year before the Tongmenghui was founded.¹⁶ We also gather data on the titles, publication date, and publication of some 13,239 books published between 1911 and 1920.¹⁷ We combine these with data we compiled on Confucian temples, also from county-level gazetteers, and on distance to the nearest major railway line.¹⁸ Finally, we draw on data from Bai and Jia (2016) for the size of imperial exam quotas before and after the Taiping Rebellion, the size of prefectures, linguistic fragmentation, land taxes in 1820, and the location of treaty ports. Basic descriptive statistics are shown in table A2 (see also fig. 2).

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

Our quantitative research design builds on extensive qualitative research on the decisions by missionaries about where to proselytize. We draw on firsthand missionary accounts, such as letters written by missionaries, and the official records and publications of missionary organizations.

The historical record shows that Protestant missionaries who entered China in the decades immediately after China was opened to missionary activity lacked all but the most basic information about conditions in the regions they planned to travel to. This was a result partly of the long-standing Qing policy of denying foreigners entry into the interior of China. It was also a result of missionaries' limited ability to read or speak Chinese.

Importantly, the small amount of information that some Protestant missionary societies gathered before they entered the field was in some cases grossly incorrect. One of the most widely read Chinese missionary tracts of the nineteenth-

although it likely omits some smaller antimissionary incidents that did not create a historical record.

16. The main data came from Shi, Fushen, and Cuidi (1991). A research assistant cross-referenced this source with the *National Periodical Index* (全国报刊索引) (Shanghai: Shanghai Library Press, 1980) and the *Dacheng Guzhidui* (大成故纸堆) data set, which is available at <http://www.dachengdata.com/tuijian/> (accessed May 2022). To place newspapers in the proper Qing era prefecture, we referred to the map collections in the *Chinese Historical Map Collection: Qing Era* (中国历史地图集—清时代) (Shanghai: China Map Press, 1982) and the *Chinese Ancient Map Collection: Qing Era* (中国古代地图集—清代) (Beijing: Cultural Relics Press, 1997).

17. We use as our source *A Complete Book Catalogue of the Republican China Period* (民国时期总书目) (Bibliographic Literature Press, 1987).

18. We digitized and geocoded the railway line from the Railroads Map in 1953 China collected by the Library of Congress (<http://www.loc.gov/item/2007627280>) and collected the information on opening time for each railroad route from Zhang (1997).

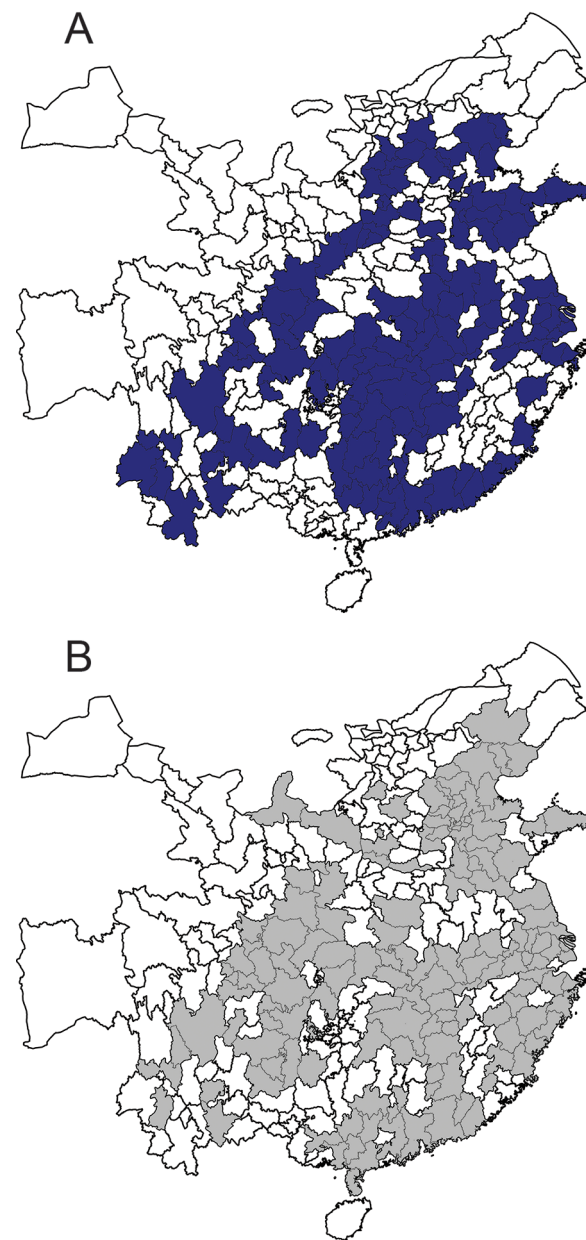


Figure 2. Prefectures with founders of the Tongmenghui (A) and with antimissionary conflict highlighted (B). Note that the data set excludes the western territories of Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Tibet.

century era was James Hudson Taylor's *Chinese Spiritual Needs and Claims*. Hudson was the founder of the China Inland Mission (CIM), which began its operations in China in 1865. Between the 1860s and 1880s, his book underwent several printings and was uniquely influential in encouraging American missionaries to move to China. In the book, Taylor attempts to recruit missionaries to specific regions of China, drawing almost entirely on simple facts about the population of a region (which represented the possible number of souls to save) and its geographic size (which was evidently meant to

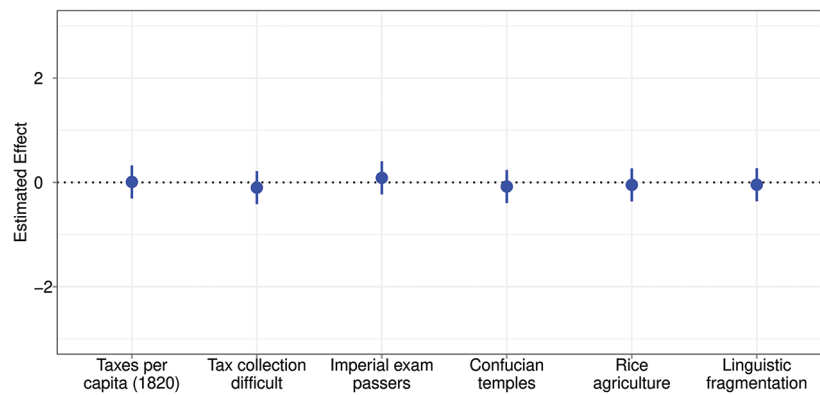


Figure 3. Placebo tests showing the relationship between the log number of China Inland Mission missionaries in 1865–84 and key outcomes.

inspire missionaries with the vastness of China). Yet Taylor’s information was often off by a factor of two or more.¹⁹

In general, while missionaries were strategic about where they proselytized, they were constrained in China by their lack of information, which led them to open mission stations in a relatively haphazard manner. To support this claim, we provide two types of evidence. First, in appendix section A, we present a sampling of missionary writings that underscore the confused, partial understanding that missionaries had of China in the decades between the 1860s and early 1900s. The qualitative evidence is one important source for our understanding of the process of missionary entry. Next, we conduct placebo tests that examine the plausibility of our argument that the location of CIM stations was haphazard. We focus on key outcomes captured in the years before missionary entry. Figure 3 presents bivariate correlations between the number of missionaries from the CIM and key outcome variables.

The placebo tests show that the location of missions was unrelated to preexisting levels of state capacity. We measure this in terms of taxes collected per capita and also Qing government ratings of whether tax collection in a prefecture was considered difficult. The lack of a relationship between CIM mission stations and these measures of state capacity reduces concerns that our findings are driven by a potential confounding factor: that weak state capacity both allowed missionaries to operate freely and made it harder for the empire to control the growth of nationalist mobilization.

19. For example, he underestimates the population of some regions by a factor of two, writing that Anhui Province had a population of 9 million, which was a considerable underestimate since at the time it contained around 21 million people, yet he overestimates the populations of other regions, such as Jiangxi Province. The information in much of rest of the tract is just as haphazard, even when it came to his reckonings for the geographic area of provinces, which ought to have been the most straightforward information to acquire. Table A1 compares Taylor’s estimates of the size and population of provinces with more accurate figures.

Missionary entry was also uncorrelated with local elite structure, measured in terms of imperial exam passers. This is important to show because of the argument by Bai and Kung (2015) that participation in the revolution was driven by elite anger over the abolition of the exam, which eliminated an important pathway of elite recruitment. It could be the case that missionary entry was correlated with both the composition of local elites and the amount of revolutionary activity. However, mission station size was unrelated to exam passers, suggesting we are capturing an alternative channel.

Finally, missionary entry was uncorrelated with three key measures that capture differences in local social structure. One possibility is that nationalist mobilization was driven by areas where traditional culture was weak. The tests show no relationship between the number of Confucian temples and mission size. Another possibility is that differences in economic structure in China’s primarily agrarian economy drove nationalist mobilization. Yet mission location is unrelated to the dominance of rice agriculture. Finally, one concern is that the results may capture differences in cohesion. However, CIM mission locations are unrelated to linguistic fragmentation.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS: MISSIONARIES, CONFLICT, AND NATIONALIST MOBILIZATION

To examine whether missionary presence is associated with greater nationalist mobilization, we turn to OLS regression and then to an IV approach. (See app. sec. B for a formal explanation of the specifications. In the appendix we also present robustness tests including sensitivity analysis, regression tables with coefficients for all control variables, alternate measurement strategies in app. sec. F, and bounding analysis.)

We focus on a cross-section of prefectures because overtime analysis using a panel format is not tenable. Substantively, the formation of the Tongmenghui and other groups occurred over a matter of a few years, but biographical accounts make it clear that members were generally radicalized in the years before this period, making it unclear how to structure a prefecture-year

Table 1. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Showing Relationship between Log Mission Size (Standardized) and a Binary Outcome for Nationalist Mobilization

	Founder of Tongmenghui			Founder of Any Nationalist Organization		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mission size (log)	.099*** (.020)	.084*** (.021)	.052** (.021)	.113*** (.017)	.090*** (.019)	.056*** (.019)
Province fixed effects		✓	✓		✓	✓
Geographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
Other controls			✓			✓
Observations	249	246	240	249	246	240

Note. Geographic controls are treaty port, log area, and coastal location. Other controls are log population, log distance to railway, log newspapers, and log imperial exam quota. Standard errors in parentheses. See table A3 for full results.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

data set. In addition, there is little variation in missionary activity in the narrow window during the founding period of these nationalist organizations. Because of these limitations, we build a cross-sectional data set.

The CIM's haphazard entry into regions of China in the 1860s–80s, we argue above, provides a source of plausibly exogenous variation in mission location. We focus on the CIM because it has the distinction of being both the largest and most influential missionary group and evidently among the least well informed. We collect data on the location of CIM stations during the first two decades of its operation, from 1865 to 1884.

More missionaries, more nationalist mobilization

In table 1 we examine the relationship between mission size and the likelihood of nationalist mobilization. We begin in columns 1 and 4 with bivariate specifications, which show the relationship between mission size (measured in log terms) and nationalist mobilization (measured as in indicator variable). This simple specification is arguably the most credible estimate since it relies on the underlying research design rather than a model (Dunning 2012). In the appendix we report results using different measurement strategies.

The estimates show that a 1 standard deviation increase in the size of missions is associated with a 10 percentage point increase in the likelihood that a prefecture produced a founding member of the Tongmenghui or another nationalist organization. Since 49% of prefectures produce a member of the Tongmenghui, this represents an increase of about 20% over the baseline. Results using binary measures, presented in the appendix, show that prefectures with an early mission station were about 31% more likely to produce a member of a nationalist revolutionary society.

After the bivariate analysis, we gradually add control variables to the model. Since province-level variation could drive both missionary entry and nationalist mobilization, we add province fixed effects. We also add a set of geographic control variables. We include an indicator for whether a prefecture contains a treaty port and an indicator for coastal location, since one possibility is that foreign contact in general drove mobilization. The results, presented in table 1 columns 2 and 5 remain substantively unchanged, showing that a 1 standard deviation increase in mission size predicts an increase of around 8 or 9 percentage points in nationalist mobilization.

In the final set of specifications, we add controls that control for political, social, and economic variables that existing theory suggests might also drive the rise of nationalism. Anderson (1983, 32–36) notes that common readership of newspapers helped to create of an “imagined community” and were in some places an important precursor for the rise of nationalism.²⁰ We add a control for the log number of newspapers in a prefecture. Weber (1976, 205–12) argues that the growth of railways and railway stations helped to link together villages into one national market and national community. In our models, we also include a control for distance to the nearest railway. To account for the possibility that urbanization might spur nationalist mobilization, we include controls for log population. Finally, given the important argument by Bai and Jia (2016)

20. At the same time, Anderson (1983, 63–65) notes the “provinci-ality” of newspapers and, throughout his book, highlights the centrality of other factors in the rise of print capitalism in Europe, especially the distribution of books in a common language. However, in China the printing of books using movable type and a common language began 900 years earlier, in the Song Dynasty, making this hypothesis less relevant.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Showing Relationship between Log Mission Size (Log Standardized) and Antimissionary Conflicts

	Missionary Conflicts (Log Std)			Missionary Conflicts (Dummy)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mission size (log)	.264*** (.066)	.218*** (.049)	.170*** (.044)	.099*** (.017)	.095*** (.020)	.076*** (.021)
Province fixed effects		✓	✓		✓	✓
Geographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
Social controls			✓			✓
Observations	249	246	240	249	246	240

Note. Geographic controls are treaty port, log area, and coastal location. Other controls are log population, log distance to railway, log newspapers, and log imperial exam quota. Standard errors in parentheses. See also table A3.

* $p < .1$.
 ** $p < .05$.
 *** $p < .01$.

that the abolition of the imperial exam drove mobilization in the Tongmenghui, we also include a control for the imperial exam quota. The estimates, presented in table 1 columns 3 and 6 remain positive and significant, if slightly smaller.²¹

More missionaries, more conflict

Did the spread of the CIM lead to increased antimissionary conflict? Examining whether this is the case is important for our research design because it is possible that the spread of antimissionary mobilization was driven by other Christian groups or by general antiforeign sentiment.

Our next set of models examine the correlation between mission size and the number of missionary conflicts. We examine two outcomes: the log number of missionary conflicts (standardized to aid interpretation) and an indicator variable.

Table 2 shows that greater missionary penetration by the CIM was indeed associated with sharp increases in the number of antimissionary conflicts. Depending on the specification, we find that a 1 standard deviation increase in the size of missionaries is correlated with as much as a quarter standard deviation increase in the likelihood of antimissionary conflict. Substantively, adding two missionaries to a given mission station was correlated with the likelihood of one additional antimissionary conflict.²²

21. One important shortcoming of these variables, especially the newspaper measure, is that they are not all measured pretreatment. Therefore, these specifications should be treated with caution. We note however that the results remain significant without these variables in the model.

22. For simplicity, this is calculated by examining the bivariate correlation without taking the log values.

More antimissionary conflict, more nationalist mobilization

Does antimissionary conflict spark nationalist mobilization? This is our central hypothesis in this study. To examine this, we turn to two-stage least squares analysis, using the size of CIM stations as an instrument for later missionary conflict.²³

Table 3 presents estimates instrumenting for missionary conflict on early CIM activity. The bivariate results show a strong relationship between missionary conflict and nationalist organization.²⁴ With additional control variables, the estimates remain substantively unchanged.²⁵

In combination with the qualitative evidence we have collected, these results increase the plausibility of our claim that missionary entry caused nationalist mobilization through the channel of antiforeign mobilization. Causal interpretation of the IV estimates requires the exclusion restriction to hold—that missionary presence influenced mobilization only through the channel of antimissionary conflict. This assumption is strong,

23. The F -test value passes the typical weak instrument threshold, as do subsequent estimates (Staiger and Stock 1997).

24. One common concern with IV estimates is that they often produce estimates that are significantly larger than the OLS estimates. In this case, the baseline IV estimates are only about two and a half times larger than the OLS estimates. The difference may reflect bias in the OLS estimates; the fact that IV estimates a local average treatment effect; or, of most concern to us, bias in the IV estimates.

25. The fact that the estimates do not change with the addition of control variables provides suggestive but inconclusive evidence in favor of the credibility of our research design. If the OLS estimates changed substantially when we added control variables, it might indicate potential bias in the bivariate estimate. Instead, the IV estimates did not, consistent with the idea that the instrument provides plausibly random variation.

Table 3. Two-Stage Least Squares Regression Showing Relationship between Log Mission Size (Standardized) and Log Antimissionary Conflicts (Standardized)

	Founder of Tongmenghui			Founder of Any Nationalist Organization		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Missionary conflicts (log)	.375*** (.111)	.386*** (.109)	.305** (.143)	.429*** (.093)	.411*** (.093)	.329*** (.123)
Province fixed effects		✓	✓		✓	✓
Geographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
Social controls			✓			✓
Weak instruments	15.97	19.74	14.12	15.97	19.74	14.12
Observations	249	246	240	249	246	240

Note. Geographic controls are treaty port, log area, and coastal location. Other controls are log population, log distance to railway, log newspapers, and log imperial exam quota. Standard errors in parentheses. See table A3 for full results.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

and we think caution is warranted in interpreting results using an IV strategy.

In the appendix, we present additional results. Simple interaction models show that prefectures with large missions and many conflicts are the most likely to produce nationalists, consistent with our hypothesized channel. However, a bounding exercise, following Becker and Woessmann (2009), does not allow us to rule out that other channels may also be at work.

One important alternative pathway through which missionaries may have influenced nationalism is through the spread of ideas. First, missionaries may have directly promoted Western ideas about nationalism, republicanism, and constitutions. Second, presence may have also sparked discussion among local intellectuals about the need for political change. These pathways are not necessarily incompatible with our theory—they may indeed be complementary to it—but do represent a potential threat to the exclusion restriction assumption. In the next section we examine this alternative pathway in detail.

LITTLE EVIDENCE MISSIONARIES WERE EFFECTIVE AT SPREADING POLITICAL IDEAS

Did missionaries spread political ideas? To examine this possibility, we turn to data on book titles as a proxy for the diffusion of ideologies. We gather a geocoded data set of 13,239 titles from 1911 to 1920, which allows us to track book production in fine-grained detail.²⁶ Books were perhaps the most impor-

tant way that intellectuals spread new ideas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Focusing on book production has important limitations: among them, books published in one city can be bought and read in another, and our data are limited to the postrevolutionary period. Still, our measure of local book production captures an important dimension of local intellectual culture.

We investigate whether mission size was correlated with increased production of books in two key categories: books about politics and books by Western authors. Examining the production of translated books from Western authors helps assess whether missionaries directly spread Western ideas. The production of books about political topics more generally tests whether missionary presence led to a broader political ferment among intellectuals, a second possible alternative pathway. We present results here on the log number of books, but the results are substantively unchanged if we use the percentage of books on these topics or a dichotomous measure that captures whether a prefectural press produced any book in these two areas.

Table 4 presents models estimating the relationship between missionary activity and the production of books on these topics. In each case, the results are not statistically significant, and the estimates, with standardized coefficients, are close to zero and, in one case, change sign.

In short, we find little evidence that missionary activity drove local variation in the spread of foreign political ideas. Moreover, these results cannot speak to the possibility that, at the national level, missionary presence had an important effect on the development of nationalism. It is quite plausible that

26. We are able to determine the publishing location of around 10,000 of these titles.

Table 4. Relationship between Mission Size and Local Press Publication (1905–21) of Books with Political Topics and Books Originally Published in a Foreign Language

	Books on Politics (Log)			Books in Translation (Log)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Mission size (log)	.074 (.059)	.087 (.063)	.063 (.054)	.012 (.027)	.002 (.030)	−.017 (.027)
Province fixed effects		✓	✓		✓	✓
Geographic controls		✓	✓		✓	✓
Economic and political controls			✓			✓
Observations	247	244	238	247	244	238

Note. Geographic controls are treaty port, log area, and coastal location. Other controls are log population, log distance to railway, log newspapers, and log imperial exam quota. Standard errors in parentheses. Variables have been standardized. Beijing and Shanghai are excluded from the analysis, although results remain unchanged when including these cities.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

missionary activity was a broad shock to intellectual life that did not necessarily vary with the presence of missionaries in an individual city. However, the lack of local variation suggests that the ideas channel does not necessarily threaten the exclusion restriction assumption.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have argued that missionary activity in China helped to spark nationalist mobilization. We used newly collected data on the biographies of nationalist secret society members to show a strong relationship between missionary activity and participation in nationalist organizations like the Tongmenghui. Our findings outline a new hypothesis for the origins of anti-imperial and anticolonial nationalist movements, tracing these movements in part to grievances caused by missionary activity. In doing so we add to a growing literature on religion, nationalism, and political violence in China (Hou 2017; Hou and Quek 2019; Wang 2021).

However, this link between missionary activity and nationalist mobilization likely has important scope conditions. It is most likely to hold, we believe, in contexts roughly similar to China or Egypt—the sites of large dynastic empires in decline—or in colonial states where the government is unresponsive to the interests of local elites. A rich literature has examined the legacy of imperialism and colonialism, especially violent imperial conquest and direct or indirect colonial administration. The other important face of the colonial project—missionary activity—also had an impact on local societies but about which we still know relatively little. This remains an important avenue for future research.

The results suggest an alternative mechanism for the missionary roots of democracy that demands further exploration. The dominant explanation is that Protestant missionary activity led to more schooling, more newspapers, and a stronger civil society and, thereby, strengthened the prospects for democracy (Woodberry 2012). Historical evidence suggests that this causal pathway is likely to be only one part of the story. In many places, from China to Nigeria, the behavior of missionaries led to anger and the formation of nationalist organizations. These organizations then played a central role in overthrowing old colonial and dynastic empires and leading, at times, to revolutionary political change.

Finally, the ways in which missionary activity spurred participation in nationalist organizations suggests a different angle on the importance of religion for political participation in the contemporary world. As others have shown, religion can influence political participation directly by influencing the beliefs and behaviors of believers (e.g., McClendon and Riedl 2015, 2019). However, the spread of religion can also have an indirect effect—spurring reactionary political mobilization among nonbelievers.

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