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**Un-mapping Republican China's Tibetan Frontier:  
Politics, Warlordism and Ethnicity along the Kham/Xikang Borderland\***

DR JAMES LEIBOLD  
La Trobe University

Department of Asian Studies  
Victoria 3086 AUSTRALIA  
Tel +613 9479 2089  
Fax +613 9479 1880  
Email: j.leibold@latrobe.edu.au

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In the People's Republic of China (PRC) historians generally depict the Kuomintang's national minority policy in starkly negative terms. They contend that Chiang Kai-shek's Central Government denied the very existence of minority nationalities and attempted to forcefully assimilate all ethnic diversity into a single, Han-dominated *Zhonghua minzu* or "Chinese nation/race." This "fascist" or "chauvinistic" approach is frequently contrasted with Sun Yat-sen's policy of minority self-determination and self-rule formulated during the last years of his life under Comintern influence. A recent textbook published by the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party, for example, describes Kuomintang policy as one of "discrimination, oppression and assimilation" and

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contends that it represented a complete reverse of Sun Yat-sen's principle of *minzuzhuyi* (nationalism).<sup>1</sup>

Historians writing outside China have largely perpetuated this uniformly negative characterization. Lacking an independent and systematic analysis of the discourse on *minzu* in Republican China,<sup>2</sup> these scholars have uncritically adopted the attitude of their PRC secondary sources. For example, Linda Benson's summary of Kuomintang policy closely dovetails that of the Central Party School.<sup>3</sup> Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, a US-trained historian, argues that the "real function" of the Commission on Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs (*Mengzang weiyuanhui* or CMTA), the Nationalist Government's principal

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1 Jiang Ping (ed.), *Zhongguo minzu wenti de lilun yu shijian* (Theory and practice of China's national question) (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1994), 110. Not surprisingly, Sun Yat-sen's principle of *minzuzhuyi* is a good deal more nuanced than this depiction would lead us to believe. I have argued elsewhere that a persistent social evolutionary logic dominated Sun's positioning of the ethnic minorities in his principle of *minzuzhuyi*. Despite being influenced by the principle of "national self-determination" (*minzu zijue*) during the waning years of his life, Sun felt that the principle was only applicable to the entire *Zhonghua minzu* in its struggle for equality with the other nations of the world, and not China's small and insignificant population of ethnic minorities who, in Sun's mind, were destined to be "smelt together in the same furnace" (*rong er ru yu yilu*) with the Han majority in creating a more evolutionary robust Chinese nation/race. See James Leibold, "Positioning 'minzu' within Sun Yat-sen's Discourse of *Minzuzhuyi*," *Journal of Asian History*, 38.1-2 (2004): 163-213.

2 The term *minzu* was adapted from the Japanese term *minzoku* (which itself was a neologism for the German word *volk*) around the early 1880s. It did not however come into widespread use among Chinese intellectuals until the first decade of the 1900s. In early twentieth century China (and one could argue today as well) *minzu* was used to express a cluster of meanings and associations similar to those conveyed by the English terms race, nation, people, ethnic group and nationality. Some Chinese authors went to great lengths to define the term, listing any number of objective criteria necessary for *minzu* formation. Many others, however, employed it in a very loose and often contradictory fashion, frequently, for example, using it interchangeably with the terms *zhongzu* (race) and *renmin* (people). Although most users of the term undoubtedly believed that *minzu* expressed a specific objective reality, the ambiguous nature of the term added to its polemical value. Partha Chatterjee has pointed out that "'politics' necessarily operates in an ideological world in which words rarely have unambiguous meanings; where notions are inexact, and have political value precisely because they are inexact and hence capable of suggesting a range of possible interpretations." Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), vii. I would contend that the ambiguous meaning of the terms *minzu* requires that we avoid an *a priori* definition and instead interpret its meaning based on the specific context of its usage.

3 Linda Benson, *The Ili Rebellion: The Moslem Challenge to Chinese Authority in Xinjiang, 1944-1949* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), 11.

frontier policymaking body, was to “carry out the official solution of the minority problem, namely, a complete assimilation of the non-Han peoples in the Chinese state.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Colin Mackerras has argued that Chiang Kai-shek was strongly opposed to any form of autonomy for the frontier minorities, regarding national unity as paramount in China’s struggle for modernity and equality with the rest of the world’s nation-states, while Suisheng Zhao recently stated that Chiang’s Kuomintang Central Government “carried out a policy of *Hanhua* (Hanification or Sinification) to assimilate ethnic minorities and frontier territories into an indivisible unitary Chinese nation-state,” which sharply contrasted with (at least initially) the Chinese Communists Party’s “instrumental strategy” which recognized the ethnic self-determination of Chinese minorities.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, this article calls into question this overly simplistic and polemical depiction. In discussing Kuomintang national minority policy, Chinese and Western scholars alike make frequent reference to the Party’s famous 1943 political tract *China’s Destiny* (*Zhongguo mingyun*), which contended all “Chinese” citizens, including the Manchus, Mongols, Tibetans, Hui and other frontier minorities, were interrelated “lineage branches”

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4 Edwin Pak-Wah Leung, “Regional Autonomy versus Central Authority: The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Movement and the Chinese Response, 1925-1947,” *Journal of Oriental Studies* 25, no.1 (1986): 53.

5 Colin Mackerras, *China’s Minorities: Integration and Modernization in the Twentieth Century* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59; Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 172. For another classical example see the widely cited June Teufel Dryer, *China’s Forty Millions: Minority Nationalities and National Integration in the People’s Republic of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 15-41; and for a more recent examples, Edward J.M. Rhoads, *Manchus & Han: Ethnic Relations and Political Power in Late Qing and Early Republican China, 1861-1928* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 275-76; Uradyn E. Bulag, *The Mongols at China’s Edge: History and the Politics of National Unity* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc, 2002), 110; and Stevan Harrell, *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 29-31.

(*zongzhi*) of a single, consanguineous *Zhonghua minzu*.<sup>6</sup> This book, which was published in Chiang Kai-shek's name but actually ghost written by Kuomintang historian and party member Tao Xisheng, only represented the Party's ideal discursive imagining of the Chinese nation-state as ancient, unified and homogenous. In the realm of praxis, a weak Kuomintang state was forced to adopt a more pragmatic approach to the so-called "frontier question" (*bianjiang wenti*). Here, Chiang Kai-shek's largely overlooked 1934 speech to military officials at his Nanchang military headquarters proves more revealing. Admitting that the Central Government lacked the strength to directly control its vast frontiers, he called for the adoption of a "conciliatory" (*rouxing*) and "loose rein" (*jimi*) policy. "If we let them go and rule themselves," Chiang stressed, "the border people will enjoy their freedom; yet amongst their traditional customs there still exists a good deal of room for a loose rein (*jimi*) and enticement (*longge*) approach; they put up a bold front like a paper tiger, yet each of their national sentiments are isolated and they certainly do not have the capacity for unity."<sup>7</sup> While Chiang spoke admirably of Soviet Russia's "voluntary federation" (*lianbian ziyou*) and called for the establishment of a system of voluntary federation among China's five largest

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6 Chiang Kai-shek, *Zhongguo zhi mingyun (China's destiny)*, 2d rev. ed. (Taipei: Zhongzheng shuju, 1986 [1944]), or as translated in Philip Jaffe (ed.) *China's Destiny and Chinese Economic Theory* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1947). On Tao Xisheng's authorship see Arlif Dirlik, "T'ao His-sheng: The Social Limits of Change," in Charlotte Furth (ed.) *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 305.

7 Chiang Kai-shek, "Zhongguo zhi bianjiang wenti" (China's frontier problem), 7 March 1934, in Kuomintang dangshi weiyuanhui (comp.) *Zongtong Jiang gong sixiang yanlun zongji (The complete works of the late President Chiang Kai-shek)* (Taipei: Zhongguo Kuomintang zhongyang weiyuanhui dangshi weiyuanhui, 1984), Vol. 12: 108. This speech alone (not to mention other policy statements that I will discuss) makes June Teufel Dreyer's assertion that the Kuomintang's policy pronouncements on the national minorities were "stridently assimilationist in tone" highly problematic. See June Teufel Dreyer, *China's Political System: Modernization and Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1996), p. 283.

*minzu* (Han, Mongol, Manchu, Tibetan and Hui), his strategy for dealing with the frontier problem was steeped in the historic language and administrative precedents of the Qing dynasty's *Lifanyuan* (Bureau of Colonial Affairs), the organization responsible for overseeing the Qing court's relations with its ethnic penumbra.<sup>8</sup> By adopted the pragmatic and laissez-faire frontier policies of the Qing empire, the Kuomintang state hoped to consolidate its political base and control over central China in preparation for a future drive towards national unity and economic revival.

Drawing on recently declassified and reprinted documents from the Commission on Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs, this article explores the implementation of Kuomintang policy along the Republic's rugged and remote Tibetan frontier. It demonstrates that in exchange for acknowledging Chinese sovereignty, the Kuomintang Central Government was willing to extend (at least temporary) a high degree of political and cultural autonomy to the Tibetans and other frontier minorities. Xiaoyuan Liu has recently argued that the Chinese Communist Party's employed an ethnopolitical strategy in consolidating its authority over Northwest China following its move to Yan'an in 1936. Breaking with Comintern policy on the "national question," Mao's

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-09. On the Lifanyuan and Qing frontier policy see Ma Ruheng and Zhao Yuntian, "Qingdai bianjiang minzu zhengce jianlun" (Brief discussion of Qing dynasty frontier nationality policy), *Qingshi yanjiu*, 2 (1991): 1-14; Ma Ruheng and Ma Dazheng, *Qingdai de bianjiang zhengce (Qing dynasty frontier policy)* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1994). Initially, Qing frontier policy was guided by the dual principles of "combining the use of force with imperial grace" (*enwei bingshi*) and "ruling by customs" (*yisu erzhi*). Yet, during the late 1700s, the Qing court began adopting more conciliatory policies towards the Mongolian, Tibetan and Xinjiang frontiers as its political power started to wane, leading it to emphasize the "grace" (*en*) side of the *enwei bingshi* strategic equation. Qing policy made use of the traditional ruling elite in Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang in governing the frontier in accordance with local customs. In exchange for political, culture and economic autonomy, frontier princes and lamas were required to pledge their loyalty towards the Qing Court through the largely symbolic tribute system. It was these "loose rein" or "winning over by all means" (*longluo*) policies that appealed most to Kuomintang policymakers as they began to formulate their own frontier policy.

Communists acknowledged the existence of ethnic diversity in China and called for all “national minorities” (*shaoshu minzu*) to unite together with the Han majority in their common struggle against the invading Japanese imperialists.<sup>9</sup> In a similar fashion, this article demonstrates how the Kuomintang Central Government also viewed the frontier and its people as potential allies in their struggle for political power. In securing the allegiance of the minorities, the Kuomintang hoped to not only bolster its nationalist credentials but also prevent the frontier from being used as a base for imperialist intrigue, warlord militarism and most importantly Communist infiltration. I do not mean to suggest that the Kuomintang was any less paternalistic or deeply committed to national unity than the Communists; but rather I would like to cast a more critical light on the relationship between state and nation-building in Republican China, demonstrating the complex and multilayered nature of the Chinese state’s attempts to deal with the frontier question in this fluid environment. If a country’s power is sufficient, Chiang Kai-shek argued in his 1934 speech, they can rely on brute strength to solve the frontier problem - securing its borders and unifying the nation – yet during times of internal weakness the state must develop a cautious, flexible and well crafted strategy to prevent the problem from deteriorating further and making it more difficult to solve in the future.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of the Tibetan frontier, the Central Government made repeated overtures to the Tibetan regime in Lhasa, hoping to eliminate British interference and secure Chinese sovereignty over the Tibetan plateau. Yet, in

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<sup>9</sup> Xiaoyuan Liu, *Frontier Passages: Ethnopolitics and the Rise of Chinese Communism, 1921-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004)

<sup>10</sup> Chiang Kai-shek, “Zhongguo zhi bianjiang wenti,” 108.

its dealings with Lhasa, the Kuomintang had to contend with a variety of independent political actors, including the number of Chinese warlords who viewed the frontier as their personal colonies and fiercely resisted any Central Government encroachment. Here Kuomintang officials came face-to-face with a completely different national imaginary, one that prioritized regional and provincial autonomy and the “civilizing” of frontier “wasteland” in the name of racial unity, development and most importantly profit. Stevan Harrell has employed the term “civilizing project” to describe the hegemonic dialogue of inequality between a civilizing center and a marginalized periphery, where the centre attempts to improve the cultural, economic and political standing of the periphery in the name of progress and modernity. Yet, the three distinct projects he identifies for China – Confucian, Christian and Communist – do not help us understand the complexities of ethnic relations during the Republican period. For Harrell, civilizing projects are essentially “asymmetrical dialogues between the centre and the periphery,” where the centre is the dominant moral, political and military authority.<sup>11</sup> In Republican China, however, neither the Kuomintang nor the Chinese Communist Party had a monopoly on political power and the state apparatuses of coercion and violence. Rather the “center” had to compete with a variety of independent actors – foreign imperialists, regional warlords, frontier minorities, political factions and third parties - each with their own conceptions of the nation-state and its direction. In studying this period, we must guard against the temptation to read the PRC’s current civilizing project backwards into the more protean

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<sup>11</sup> Stevan Harrell, “Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them,” Stevan Harrell (ed.) *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 3-36. Quote from p. 7.

and volatile environment of pre-1949 China - projecting (as much of PRC historiography does) the current discourse of Chinese nationalism onto a radically different environment.

## **I. Liu Wenhui & Chinese Encroachment along on the Sino-Tibetan**

### **Frontier**

Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Sichuan split into several competing warlord regimes each vying for supreme control over the fertile Sichuan basin and greater independence from the Central Government. The success of the Northern Expedition and the establishment of a new Kuomintang National Government did little to alter the situation. After declaring their allegiance to the Kuomintang and adopting the necessary revolutionary rhetoric, each of the Sichuan militarists and their armies were symbolically incorporated into the new National Revolutionary Army. However, as Robert Kapp has pointed out, the early Republic marked one of the high marks of Sichuanese autonomy and independence from outside influences.<sup>12</sup> Despite the limited nature of its authority, the Nationalist Government did decide to pick what it believed was the best of the lot to head “its” new government in the province. General Liu Wenhui,<sup>13</sup> the charismatic 32 year-

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic: Provincial Militarism and Central Power, 1911-38* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 62.

<sup>13</sup> A native of Dayi county in western Sichuan, Liu Wenhui was educated at the prestigious Baoting Military Academy in Beijing. After graduating in 1916, he returned to Sichuan and rose steadily through the military ranks in his native province. After splitting with his uncle Liu Xiang, the military governor of Sichuan under the Beiyang government, Liu Wenhui declared his allegiance to the Kuomintang and was appointed the Governor of Sichuan Province following the establishment of the new Kuomintang Central Government in October 1928. His appointment was disputed by rival warlords and after losing a civil war to his uncle in 1932-33, Nanjing declared Liu Xiang the new governor of Sichuan, forcing Liu Wenhui to retreat to Xikang. See “Liu Wenhui” in Howard L. Boorman and Richard C. Howard (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1967), 2: 417-19.

old commander of the 200,000-strong 24<sup>th</sup> Army, was tapped as chairman of the Kuomintang's provincial government, which existed in name only. The real prize for General Liu was his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the "Sichuan-Xikang Border Defense Force" (*Chuan-kang bianfangjun*) following the retirement of Liu Chengxun in 1927. Along the Xikang frontier zone between Sichuan and Tibet, General Liu saw the untapped resources necessary to tip the balance of power in Sichuan permanently in his favor.

Liu Wenhui's relationship with the Kuomintang Central Government in Nanjing was tense from the beginning. When Nanjing established the Inner Mongolian provinces of Suiyuan, Chahar, and Jehol in 1928, it also announced plans to create a new province from amongst the territory of the former Sichuan border region with Tibet. General Liu immediately sent a letter of protest to Nanjing claiming that the size and resources of the proposed province were insufficient with over half of the thirty-three counties currently under the control of the Tibetan military. He asked Nanjing to increase the number of revenue producing counties to forty-five by adding eight counties from the Ya'an region of Sichuan, three counties from the Ningshu region of Yunnan and several *tusi* (Chinese-installed tribal chieftains) from Qinghai. He also requested thousands of dollars from the government treasury in order to develop Xikang and restore Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.<sup>14</sup> Nanjing ignored the General's plea and dispatched its own team of officials, lead by the Tibetan CMTA official Kesang Tsering,<sup>15</sup> to "assist" General Liu in preparing

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14 Liu Wenhui, "Chuan-kang bianfang zongzhahui Liu Wenhui Xikang sheng jianyi shu sidaduan" (Sichuan-Xikang Border Defense Commander-in-Chief Liu Wenhui's four-point proposal for the creation of Xikang province), 1928, in Chen Zhimin, *Xikang yange zhi* (*A record of Xikang's development*) (Nanjing: Boti shudian, 1933), 88-91.

15 Kasang Tsering (1904-1946) was a native of Batang in Kham/Xikang who was educated in China prior to joining the Kuomintang in 1924 as its first Tibetan member. After

for the establishment of the new province. Liu Wenhui refused to cooperate with Kesang, and set up his own “Xikang Special Region Administrative Committee” (*Xikang tequ zhengwu weiyuanhui*) without Nanjing’s approval.<sup>16</sup> When Kesang attempted to establish a rival Xikang Border Defense Force and “Xikang Committee for the Construction of a Province” (*Xikang jiansheng weiyuanhui*) in Batang, Liu Wenhui started executing members of Kesang’s staff. Nanjing quickly backed down and withdrew Kesang Tsering from the region, recognizing the authority of Liu’s administrative committee.<sup>17</sup> Given its tenuous hold over most of China at the time, Nanjing could ill afford to alienate those frontier warlords who were willing, at least nominally, to recognize its authority. Chiang Kai-shek had little hope of consolidating his rule over China without the support of these regional allies.

Over the next two and a half decades, Liu Wenhui ruled Xikang as his personal fiefdom, viewing the region and its untapped resources as a springboard for eventual rule over all of Sichuan. Working from their offices in Kangding, the Xikang Administrative Committee drew up detailed plans for the construction of railway lines, new roads, hydro-electric plants, leather and wool processing factories, agricultural research centers, and the clearing,

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the establishment of the CMTA in 1928, he was appointed a commissioner and placed in charge of developing the Kuomintang Central Government’s policy towards Tibet. See Melvyn Goldstein, Dawei Sherap, and William R. Siebenschuh, *A Tibetan Revolutionary: The Political Life and Times of Bapa Phüntso Wangye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 10

<sup>16</sup> On the establishment and composition of the Xikang Special Region Administrative Committee see Xikang tequ zhengwu weiyuanhui (comp.), *Xikang tequ zhengwu weiyuanhui zhounian zhuankan* (Special one-year anniversary publication of the Xikang Special Region Administrative Committee) (Kangding: Xikang tequ zhengwu weiyuanhui, 1929).

<sup>17</sup> Feng Youzhi, *Xikangshi shiyi: quanji* (*Complete collection of the lost history of Xikang*) (Kangding: Ganzi zangzu zizhizhou zhengxie wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1992), 115-20; Chen Zhiming, *Xikang yange zhi* (*A survey of Xikang’s revolutionary path*) (Nanjing: Boti shudian, 1933), 103.

cultivation, and mining of Xikang's vast forests and grasslands.<sup>18</sup> Yet, to properly exploit Xikang's resources while also providing the necessary supplies to increase the size of his army, Liu Wenhui needed to attract colonists and administrators to the region. With a population density of only two people/square *li*, one Xikang writer claimed that at least one million starving Sichuan peasants could farm the "virgin land" of Xikang over the next ten years.<sup>19</sup> In a 1929 report funded by Liu's administration, Dong Tiaofu outlined the extensive opportunities for *kenhuang* (the opening up of wasteland) in Xikang, claiming, for example, that 75% of Lüding, 40% of Kangding and 80+% of Daofu counties were ripe for colonization.<sup>20</sup>

Liu Wenhui was mainly interested in cultivating opium. Opium, Owen Lattimore astutely pointed out, played the role in China that gold played in America, Australia and elsewhere, providing the economic incentive necessary to draw Chinese settlers onto the rugged frontier and bring thousands of acres of land under cultivation and Chinese style-administration.<sup>21</sup> Liu Wenhui was reported to have called opium the "lifeline" (*shengmingxian*) of the 24<sup>th</sup> Army, with its export to Sichuan and the rest of China serving as the main source of revenue for his regime.<sup>22</sup> While millions

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18 On the supposed accomplishments of Liu's regime as of late 1929 and its future plans see Du Xiangrong, "Zuijin duiyu Xikang de kaocha yu yijian: yu bianzheng xunlian suo Liubu ge tongzhi tanhua" (Recent investigation and opinion on Xikang: A talk given to the comrades of the 24th Army at the Frontier Training Institute), *Bianzheng* 1.1 (September 1929): 69-82.

19 Chen Zhongwei, *Xikang Wenti (The Xikang Problem)* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1930), 99.

20 Cited in Mei Xinfu, *Xikang (Xikang)* (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1970 [1934]), 230-37.

21 Owen Lattimore, "Chinese Colonization in Manchuria," in *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928-58* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 321.

22 Feng Youzhi, *Xikangshi shiyi*, 299; On Liu Wenhui's encouragement of opium cultivation and other aspects of his Xikang regime see "Tibetan Border Region" in A. Doak Barnett, *China on the Eve of Communist Takeover* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 215-29.

did not flock to Xikang, the relative stability of Liu's regime and profits from the opium trade did produce a sharp rise in the Chinese population of Xikang.

Take for example, the population of Kangding county, which grew from 2900 to 8234 families between 1930 and 1934. In 1936, Mei Xinfu estimated that the Chinese now comprised 16% or 600,000 of Xikang's 3.8 million people.<sup>23</sup>

To cultivate the expertise necessary for the development of Xikang, the offices of the 24<sup>th</sup> Army launched the first Chinese journal dedicated specifically to frontier administration, *Bianzheng* (*Border Administration*), in September 1929. The journal employed the new language of "revolution" – national unity, political representation and economic development as couched in Sun Yat-sen's Three People's Principles – to promote the interest of the region and its people. In promoting Xikang as a "gold vault" (*jinchao*) and "treasure trove" (*baokun*) rich in gold, silver, copper, timber, medicinal herbs, and other natural resources, the journals editors hoped to lure additional colonists to the region in support of Liu Wenhui's regime. They also warned, however, that this untapped wealth was attracting the greedy eye of foreign imperialists and called on the Central Government to allocate special funds for the development of this strategic "buffer zone" (*pingfan*).<sup>24</sup> Like other militarist regimes on the fringes of Republican China, Liu Wenhui's 24<sup>th</sup> Army was quick to adopt the modern discourse of revolution to advance its control and domination over local resources and garner the support of the political center

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23 The population figures are from Sichuan sheng kangding xian zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (comp.) *Kangding xianzhi* (*Kangding county gazetteer*) (Chengdu: Sichuan cishu chubanshe, 1995), 73; Mei Xinfu, *Xikang*, 13-14.

24 Hu Horu, "Bianyan" (Preface), *Bianzheng* 1.1 (September 1929): i-ii.

or, at the very least, keep it at arm's length and prevent it from interfering in local affairs.<sup>25</sup>

Unique insight into Liu Wenhui's modernist, revolutionary discourse can be gained from a propaganda play serialized in *Bianzheng* during the fall of 1929. Entitled "To the frontier" (*Dao biandi qu*), the play tells the story of a Chengdu youth's decision to forsake his elderly parents and childless wife for the hardships of the Xikang frontier.<sup>26</sup> The story's protagonist, Kong Zhenyuan or "Kong the Pacifier of Distant Lands," learns of the importance of the Xikang frontier after returning from geological studies in England. One of his friends tells him that England has recently sent troops into Tibet and is cunningly inciting the Tibetans to raise an army and attack the interior, threatening not only Xikang and Sichuan but all of China. Another of his friends laments how the abundant natural resources of Xikang remain untapped due to the shortage of expertise and colonists needed to exploit them. Patriotism stirs Kong into action. Arguing that "family-ism" (*jiazuzhuyi*) needs to be replaced with "nationalism" (*guozuzhuyi*), Kong ignores the emotional pleas of his family and departs for the frontier to offer his services to the country. During his journey of several months on foot to the Yangtze border town of Batang, Kong and his trusted servant Old Wang endure numerous hardships - a diet of *tsampa* (barley paste gruel), dirty inns, freezing weather, and harsh travel conditions - before finally being stripped of all their outer garments and money by ruthless bandits. Aided by one of Liu Wenhui's officers, Kong finally

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25 For other examples, see Jonathan Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 175 & *passim* and Bulag, *The Mongols at China's Edge: History*, 29-62.

26 Dong Tiaofu, "Dao biandi qu" (To the frontier), *Bianzheng* 1.1-2 (September-October 1929): 1-18 & 1-46.

reaches Batang, where he is treated like a messiah-king by a mob of child-like Tibetan barbarians (*yizhong*), who sing and dance in wild excitement on learning of Kong's intention to "bridge the boundary between the Han and barbarians (*yi*), abolish their suffering and foil the secret plans of the English imperialists to invade China." Mesmerized by the dancing and singing of the Tibetan women, Old Wang exclaims to his master that "they are like a group of celestial maidens (*xiannu*) who have descended from heaven!" Attempting to momentarily fain appropriate conduct, Kong also becomes titillated by their "bewitching frolicking" (*ximimi*) as Old Wang asks him to join in their dancing.<sup>27</sup>

During one of the final scenes, entitled "A Glimpse at the Accomplishments," the audience learns of the rewards reaped by Kong's numerous sacrifices, and by extension other Chinese youths willing to head out into the frontier. When a couple of old friends from Chengdu pay a visit to the offices of his "Xikang Construction Department" in Chamdo, Kong explains the recent accomplishments of his office. Thanks to the detailed survey maps provided by Kong's large staff of researchers, the 24<sup>th</sup> Army has advanced within 60 miles of Lhasa and is now awaiting further maps from Kong before laying siege on the Tibetan capital. Kong's development plans have already lead to the opening of numerous gold, silver, copper and iron mines, the establishment of wool processing factories, leather tanneries, and dairies while also contributing to the cultivation of over 100,000 *mu* of wasteland. We also learn that all of Xikang has been returned to Chinese administration with the complete pacification of the frontier barbarians. From the comments of his

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1.1: 1-18 and Vol. 1.2: 1-32 with quotes from Vol. 1.2: 31 & 32.

friends, the audience also discovers that Kong benefited financially from his selfless contribution to his country. The play ends with Kong's triumphant return home over the New Year holiday to discover that his wife has given birth to their first child - a son of course! By performing the play throughout those parts of Sichuan under his control, General Liu hoped to attract the necessary talent and resources for the development of the Xikang frontier region and maintenance of his independent fiefdom.<sup>28</sup>

## **II. Mapping the Disputed Xikang-Tibetan Border**

As the tale of Kong Zhenyuan reveals, the Xikang border with Tibet was a source of intense conflict between Lhasa and Liu Wenhui's autonomous regime. Throughout the late Qing and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, control over the rugged Xikang-Tibetan border seesawed back and forth between the Tibetan army and the Sichuan warlords. During the waning years of the Qing dynasty, Sichuan general Zhao Erfang led an expeditionary force to within 60 miles of Lhasa, only to be pushed back over the Yangtze River following the confusion accompanying the collapse of the Manchu dynasty.<sup>29</sup> The Tibetans, under the leadership of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, forcefully expelled Manchu/Chinese officials from Lhasa and declared Tibet proper and the ethnically Tibetan, although largely autonomous, regions of Amdo (Qinghai) and Kham (Xikang) part of an independent Tibetan state. Hoping to mediate the conflict along the disputed border and secure a zone of influence in Tibet,

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1.2: 32-46.

<sup>29</sup> On Zhao Erfang see Elliot Sperling, "The Chinese Venture in K'am, 1904-1911, and the Role of Chao Erh-Feng" in Alex KcKay (ed.) *The History of Tibet, Vol. 3: The Modern Period: 1895-1959 The Encounter with Modernity* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 69-91. In a number of ways, Zhao Erfang's attempts to colonize Kham serves as a useful precedent and base on which Liu Wenhui's Xikang regime developed.

the British government pressured the Chinese into attending a tripartite conference at Simla in 1913. Following several months of intense negotiations, the three sides agreed to recognize Chinese suzerainty over Tibet in exchange for extensive Tibetan autonomy and the recognition of England's special interests in the region.<sup>30</sup>

The mapping of Tibet's border with China, however, proved much more difficult. Despite the fact that an 821 peace treaty signed between Tibet and Tang China marked the border between the two powers in perpetuity, the line between Chinese and Tibetan civilization was in a constant state of flux throughout the premodern period.<sup>31</sup> The aristocrat and monastic rulers of Kham and Amdo looked, at different times and with differing degrees of emphasis, to both Tibet and China for sources of political patronage and trade. Yet, by the time Chinese, Tibetan and British delegates meet at Simla a clear link had been established between sovereignty and territoriality, with all three powers attempting to clearly demarcate the boundary in a fashion that secured their maximum national benefit.<sup>32</sup>

The Chinese insisted on using the line of Zhao Erfang's furthest conquest, drawing the border 60 miles east of Lhasa through Giamda. The Tibetans wanted the Buddhist monasteries of Amdo and Kham included within

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30 On the Simla Conference and events leading up to it see Li Tieh-Tseng, *The Historical Status of Tibet* (Columbia: King's Crown Press, 1956), 135-42; Melvyn Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 68-88; Hugh Richardson, *Tibet and its History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962): 107-113.

31 On premodern Tibet's relations with China see Michael C. van Walt van Praag, *The Status of Tibet: History, Rights, and Prospects in International Law* (London: Wisdom Publication, 1987), 1-25

32 On the transition between premodern and modern notions of space and national sovereignty see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 62-112 & *passim*; and on how it played out in the context of Manchuria see Mark C. Elliott, "The Limits of Tartary: Manchuria in Imperial and National Geographies," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 59.3 (2000): 603-646.

their territory and proposed a Tibetan frontier stretching northeastward into modern day Qinghai and southeastward through Kangding, the capital of Xikang. Attempting to bridge the gap between the two sides and ensure continued influence in Lhasa, British delegate Sir Henry McMahon proposed his own border. The so-called McMahon line divided Tibet into an “Inner” and “Outer” half with the border running along the upper reaches of the Yangtze River. The towns of Giamda, Lagong-Ngamda, and Chamdo west of the Yangtze were included within Outer Tibet and placed directly under the administration of Lhasa. The towns of Ganzê, Batang, Nyarong and Dergê east of the Yangtze and the southeastern section of Amdo were included within Inner Tibet and placed under joint administration with the Tibetans retaining full control over all religious affairs. Under intense public pressure to stand firm on the frontier question following the revelation of open Russian interference in Outer Mongolia, the Beijing government of Yuan Shikai refused to sign the agreement.<sup>33</sup>

Liu Wenhui’s rise to power in Xikang only exacerbated the border dispute between China and Tibet. During the late 1920’s, the 24<sup>th</sup> Army pushed the Tibetan forces west of the Yangtze River, gradually garrisoning Dawu, Litang, Nyarong, Dergê, Ganzê, Batang and other counties on the eastern shore of the Yangtze River. Liu’s encroachment eventually provoked a counter-attack from Tibetan border forces stationed in Kham. On the pretext of assisting the Tibetan monks of the Targye Monastery in their long running dispute with the 24<sup>th</sup> Army-backed Beri *tusi*, the Tibetan army attacked Liu

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33 Parshotam Mehra, *The McMahon Line and After: A Study of the Triangular Contest on India’s North-eastern Frontier Between Britain, China and Tibet, 1904-1947* (Delhi: MacMillan, 1974) 162-244; Chen Zhiming, *Xikang yange zhi*, 72-82.

Wenhui's positions in Xikang during the summer of 1930. Thanks to the new weaponry and training it received at the hands of the British, the Tibetan army quickly pushed the over extended forces of Liu Wenhui backed to within 100 miles of Kangding.<sup>34</sup> At the request of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, the Central Government re-dispatched CMTA official Kesang Tsering to mediate the conflict. Liu Wenhui again refused to cooperate with Nanjing, desiring a military rather than a political solution to the problem. Attempting to override Liu Wenhui's authority, Kesang dispatched his own officials to Ganzê with orders to negotiate an immediate armistice. The draft accord reached on 7 November 1931 recognized the Tibetans as the victors in the conflict, agreeing to their demand for the establishment of a demilitarized zone in Western Xikang (which included the towns of Ganzê, Nyarong, Batang, and Daofu) and the payment of a 20,000 *yuan* indemnity by Liu Wenhui's Xikang regime. Yet, when word of the agreement slipped out, it not only sent Liu Wenhui's administration into an uproar but also captured the attention and ire of the national media in China. In the wake of rising nationalist sentiment following Japan's invasion of Manchuria, the Chinese media blamed the incident on the instigation of the British imperialists and criticized the government for appeasing rather than fighting China's enemies. This public pressure forced the Central Government to cable Kesang with instructions not to sign the accord while CMTA chairman Shi Qingyang stepped down in embarrassment over the shortcomings of his subordinates.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On the Targye Monastery incident see Mei Xinfu, *Xikang*, 97-99; Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 221-224.

<sup>35</sup> See Chen Zhiming, *Xikang yange zhi*, 102-09; Feng Youzhi, *Xikangshi shiyi*, 109-111.

Nanjing had little choice but to cable Liu Wenhui with complete authority to solve the matter on his own. Within weeks the 24<sup>th</sup> Army launched a massive counter-offensive against the Tibetan forces. With the assistance of Qinghai warlord Ma Pufang, Liu hoped to put an end to the border conflict once and for all by marching all the way to Lhasa. Liu's forces quickly drove the Tibetan army west of the Yangtze River and during the summer of 1932 was preparing for an attack on Chamdo. The Dalai Lama cabled Nanjing for assistance, and again the Central Government called on both sides to put down their arms and achieve a peaceful solution to the border problem. Liu Wenhui simply ignored the Central Government and continued with his offensive, forcing Nanjing to admit to the Dalai Lama that it was helpless to prevent the "self-defense activities of the local officials."<sup>36</sup> The 24<sup>th</sup> Army might have succeeded in marching to Lhasa if it was not for an unexpected turn of events. Sensing that Liu Wenhui had over-extended the resources of his 24<sup>th</sup> Army, his uncle and fellow Sichuan warlord Liu Xiang launched an offensive against Liu Wenhui's position in Sichuan. Liu Wenhui quickly sought a truce with the Tibetans so that his Xikang forces could join the raging civil war in Sichuan. The 8 October 1932 cease-fire called for the Tibetans to remain west

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36 See the letter from CMTA chairman Shi Qingyang to the Dalai Lama cited in Chen Zhiming, *Xikang yange zhi*, 104-05. The Dalai Lama also sought the mediation of the British, who dispatched Lieutenant-Colonel J.L.R. Weir, Political Officer in Sikkim, to Lhasa to consult on the matter. Believing that the border issue remained "the outstanding obstacle to a permanent settlement between the two countries," Weir redrafted the McMahon line to recognize the "existing rights" of the Tibetan government to Derge, Nyarong and Sangen, now including them as part of "Outer Tibet." Yet, the British decided that "the time was not opportune for pressing the Chinese government" and Weir's draft was never presented to the Chinese. As British official Hugh Richardson admitted, "the influence of Liu Wen-hui prevented the Central Government from getting a footing there [Xikang]." See Hugh Richardson, "Tibetan Precis" in *High Peaks, Pure Earth: Collected Writings on Tibetan History and Culture* (London: Serindia Publication, 1998), 573 and Carole McGranahan, "Empire and the Status of Tibet: British, Chinese, and Tibetan negotiations, 1913-1934," in McKay (ed.) *The History of Tibet*, 282.

of the Yangtze River and the Chinese to the east, temporarily returning an uneasy state of peace to the Xikang-Tibetan border.<sup>37</sup>

Tensions flared up again in the fall of 1933 when the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama issued an ultimatum to Liu Wenhui's troops to withdraw further east or face yet another attack from the Tibetan army.<sup>38</sup> Yet, the sudden death of the Dalai Lama on 17 December 1933 shifted the balance of power back into the hands of the Chinese. Liu Wenhui cabled Chiang Kai-shek asking for Central Government assistance in sending a massive expeditionary force against Tibet amidst the political instability that followed the Dalai Lama's death. Liu Wenhui argued that the Tibetan "barbarians" only understood force, or as one of his chief frontier advisers had stated:

I advocate the use of force (*wei*) first and grace (*en*) second, the punishing of one person to warn a hundred others. Because of their limited knowledge, the barbarians cannot be easily persuaded with words. If one uses kindness towards them they only become recalcitrant towards Han authority....For sometime now the Han frontiersmen have learned from their own experience that 'to give a barbarian a bit of respect is not as good as beating him a bit'. The meaning of this phrase is that treating the barbarians with kindness is not as good as first treating them with force.<sup>39</sup>

In Nanjing, however, Dai Jitao and other close advisers to Chiang Kai-shek called for a conciliatory or *jimi* (loose rein) policy towards the Tibetans. They saw the death of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama as an opportunity for Nanjing to re-establish formal relations with Lhasa. On 23 December 1933, the Central Government cabled Liu Wenhui urging him not to dispatch troops and

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37 On Liu Wenhui's counter-offensive and the 10 October 1932 Truce Agreement see Feng Youzhi, *Xikangshi Shiyi*, 121-126.

38 McGranahan, "Empire and the Status of Tibet," 282.

39 Du Xiangrong, "Zujin duiyu Xikang de kaocha yu yijian: yu bianzheng shunlian suo Liubu ge tongzhi tanhua," 80-81.

claiming that it would only invite more trouble.<sup>40</sup> Not one to listen to Nanjing's orders, Liu would have probably marched on Lhasa himself if it had not been for the fact that his 24<sup>th</sup> Army had suffered a big defeat against the forces of his uncle and had retreated to Xikang to rebuild their strength.

### **III. Huang Musong's Mission & the Failure of Sino-Tibetan**

#### **Rapprochement, Part I**

The death of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the defeat of Liu Wenhui's forces presented the Central Government with its first real opportunity to seize the initiative in Sino-Tibetan relations. During the waning years of his life, the Dalai Lama and the religious elite became disenchanted with the aggressive, pro-British military officers of the Tibetan army. The almost constant state of conflict with Liu Wenhui's 24<sup>th</sup> Army was draining precious resources from the monasteries and threatening to destabilize Tibet's internal political situation. The religious establishment viewed Sino-Tibetan rapprochement as a potential counter-balance to Liu Wenhui's military adventurism on the Xikang frontier. As the Dalai Lama told CMTA official Liu Manching in 1929, he hoped that the new Chinese government would remove the "corrupt and adventurous [Chinese] civil and military officers" in Kham and replace them with honest men who would work for the mutual interests of the Tibetan and Chinese people.<sup>41</sup>

The prospects for Sino-Tibetan rapprochement increased with the selection of a pro-Chinese Kashag, or cabinet (lead by the regent Reting

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40 Fan Xiaofang, Bao Dongbo and Li Juanli, *Kuomintang lilunjia Dai Jitao* (*Kuomintang theoretician Dai Jitao*) (Hebei: Henan Renmin chubanshe, 1992), 342-43.

41 Liu Manching, *Kangzang yaozheng* (Mission to Tibet and Xikang) (Taipei: Nantian shuju, 1987 [1933]), 119; Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 213-221 & 223-24.

Rimpoche), to serve as the interim government prior to the discovery and maturity of the next Dalai Lama. Attempting to seize the initiative in this new political environment, the Kuomintang proposed in late 1934 to send a delegation to Lhasa to offer the nation's condolences on the death of the Dalai Lama and discuss Sino-Tibetan relations. Chiang Kai-shek selected one of his most trusted and skilled diplomats, General Huang Musong, for this high-profile and expensive mission of over eighty specially selected CMTA officials and staff members to Lhasa. Besides representing the Central Government at a special memorial service for the Dalai Lama, Chiang also authorized General Huang to carry out high-level negotiations with the Tibetan government on the formal resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations. In exchange for a pledge of loyalty towards Nanjing and the acknowledgment that Tibet was part of a single, unified Zhonghua Republic, the Central Government was willing to grant the Tibetans the same degree of political, cultural and religious autonomy they enjoyed under the Qing dynasty. When the Kashag agreed to the delegation, Nanjing seemed on the verge of a historic solution to the Tibetan problem.<sup>42</sup>

The hopes of the Kuomintang government, however, were quickly shattered. Throughout their talks with General Huang, the Tibetans seemed more interested in solving the intractable border issue with Xikang and Qinghai than discussing Sino-Tibetan relations. On his way to Lhasa, General Huang stopped in Chengdu to consult with General Liu Wenhui. Given the contentious nature of the Tibet-Xikang border issue, Liu's support seemed

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<sup>42</sup> On Huang Musong's mission to Tibet see Sun Zihe, "Huang Musong ruzang shiwei" (The complete story of Huang Musong's mission to Tibet) in *Xikang shishi yu renwu* (People and events in Tibetan history) (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1995), 235-78; Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 213-51; Li, *The Historical Status of Tibet*, 168-72.

crucial for the success of the Huang mission and the peaceful resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations. The General however offered little encouragement or assistance to the mission. Fearing, perhaps, that Nanjing was willing to sacrifice Xikang for the resumption of relations with Lhasa, Liu Wenhui stressed the importance of maintaining, at the very least, the Yangtze River border between Tibet and Xikang, while also expressing his desire for a quick resumption of Chinese control over Chamdo prior to the creation of a new, permanent border along the Taniantaweng Mountains east of the Salween River.<sup>43</sup> Quickly realizing that the border question was beyond his control, General Huang hoped to focus talks with the Tibetans on the more general issue of Sino-Tibetan relations while avoiding entanglement in the sticky border problem. Yet, soon after arriving in Lhasa on 28 August 1934, Reting Rimpoche stressed the Tibetan government's desire to solve the border issue prior to any discussion about the resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations. In reply, General Huang stated that the minor issue of the border could be quickly resolved after the resumption of relations while emphasizing that the Central Government was willing to be "highly flexible" over the exact nature of Sino-Tibetan relations. In the following weeks Huang's staff repeatedly pressed the Kashag to clarify in writing the exact nature of the relationship they desired with Nanjing. The Kashag ignored these requests, insisting on discussing the border issue first.<sup>44</sup>

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43 (Huang Musong), "Huang Musong fengshi ru Zang cefeng bing zhicha shisanjie Dala dashi baogaoshu" (Huang Musong's report on his mission to Tibet to confer a title and express condolences to the 13th Dalai Lama), June 1935, in Zhongguo dier lishi dang'anguan (comp.) *Zhonghua minguoshi dang'an ziliao huibian* (*Collection of archival documents on Republican history*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1994- ), 5.1.5: 262 (Hereafter cited as ZMSD).

44 (Huang Musong), "Huang Musong guanyu Rezheng deng jie jue zhongyan yu Xizang wenti taidu zhi Xingzheng Yuan deng midian" (Secret cable of Huang Musong to the

With negotiations deadlocked before they even began, General Huang announced that the Chinese government had magnanimously agreed to make a big concession and discuss the border issue along side the resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations.<sup>45</sup> Again, the General asked the Kashag for a written reply listing the conditions the Tibetans felt necessary for the establishment of good relations with Nanjing. The Tibetans finally acquiesced and handed Huang Musong's staff a written document on 5 October 1935. The Chinese were clearly disappointed, if not shocked, by the Tibetan response. The Kashag's letter stated that if the Central Government wanted to improve relations with Tibet, it would first "return all land and peoples where the Han and Tibetan cultures and language exists side-by-side to the control of the Tibetan government." The Kashag made it clear that the entire region of Kham (Xikang) and Amdo (Qinghai), which had been under direct Chinese administration since the Qing dynasty, must be returned to Tibetan control prior to the resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations.<sup>46</sup>

Despite Huang Musong's clear frustration, Premier Wang Jingwei saw room for optimism in the General's cables back to Nanjing. In particular, Wang

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Executive Yuan and others concerning the Reting's attitude about the solution of Sino-Tibetan questions), 14 September 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 211; (Huang Musong), "Huang Musong mibao sikalun tichu cuoshang zhongyang yu Xikang wenti erhou juxing dianli zhe Xingzheng Yuan deng dian" (Huang Musong's secret cable to the Executive Yuan and others concerning the four shapes desire to first discuss Sino-Tibetan problems before the holding of the memorial ceremony), 16 September 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 211-12.

45 (Wang Jingwei), "Wang Tiaoming guanyu chuli zhongyang yu Xizang difang guanxi wenti fu Huang Musong dian" (Wang Jingwei's reply cable to Huang Musong about Sino-Tibetan relations), 29 September 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 220.

46 (Huang Musong) "Huang Musong wei kalun tichu zhongyang yu Xizang wei Tanyue guanyu bing yaoqiu jiejie Kang-Xang Chuan-Xang jiewu shi zhi Xingzheng Yuan deng dian" (Huang Musong's cable to the Executive Yuan and others about the shapes' proposal for 'priest-patron' relations between Tibet and the Central Government and their desire to resolve Xikang-Tibet and Sichuan-Tibet border affairs), 5 October 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 223-24; Also see (Huang Musong), "Huang Musong wei Kaxia biangua bu tichu zhongyang yu Xizang guanxi shi zhi Xingzheng Yuan dian dian" (Huang Musong's cable to the Executive Yuan and others concerning the Kashag's going back on its word to discuss Sino-Tibetan relations), 4 October 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 222-23.

was encouraged by the details of General Huang's informal discussions with Reting Rimpoche during which the regent expressed his willingness to cooperate with the other four *minzu* in the creation of a single Zhonghua nation in exchange for "complete Tibetan autonomy" (*Xizang wanquan zizhi*). In a cable to Huang, Wang Jingwei stressed that "Sino-Tibetan relations have already amassed an importance that is difficult to back away from; since negotiations are difficult, we need to unrestrain our ideas."<sup>47</sup> Wang told Huang Musong to offer Tibet a similar level of autonomy recently granted to Inner Mongolia and promised that the Nanjing government would take concrete steps to defuse the border issue.<sup>48</sup> The Kashag agreed to discuss Nanjing's proposal before the Tibetan National Assembly. Once again, however, the Tibetan response fell short of Chinese expectations. The National Assembly claimed that the Chinese system of a "Republic of Five Races" (*wuzu gonghe minguo*) did not suit Tibet's special theocratic system of government and would violate Tibetan sovereignty. Instead, it once again called for an immediate return of Amdo and Kham to Tibetan administration. By mid-October the negotiations had reached a stalemate and General Huang was ordered to pack his bags and return to Nanjing.<sup>49</sup>

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47 (Wang Jingwei), "Wang Tiaoming wei jiejie zhongyang yu Xikang guanxi duice shi fu Huang Musong dian" (Wang Jingwei's cable back to Huang Musong about the policy for solving Sino-Tibetan relations), 8 October 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 226; (Wang Jingwei), "Wang Tiaoming wei jiejie Kang-Xang jiewu xu yu huaifu zhongyang yu Xizang guanxi bing xingshi zhi Huang Musong" (Wang Jingwei's cable to Huang Musong about solving the Xikang-Tibetan border issue, reviving Sino-Tibetan relations and other matters), 9 October 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 226-27.

48 On the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Movement and Kuomintang policy towards this movement see James Leibold, "Rethinking Guomindang National Minority Policy and the Case of Inner Mongolia," in Cindy Yik-Yi Chu and Ricardo K.S. Mak (eds.), *China Reconstructs* (New York: University Press of America, 2003), 103-124.

49 For a summary of the National Assembly's response see (Huang Musong), "Huang Musong jiang Kaxia han yaodian bao Xingzheng Yuan" (Huang Musong's cable to the Executive Yuan reporting the main points of the Kashag's letter), 17 October 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 229-30. For the complete text see (Huang Musong), "Huang Musong chenbao shiqi ri

Huang Musong's decision to leave Lhasa appeared to set off a wave of panic throughout the Tibetan administration. Realizing that nothing had been achieved from Huang's visit to defuse the potentially dangerous border issue, the Kashag urged General Huang to remain a few more days in order to discuss their new thirteen-point oral proposal for the resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations. General Huang immediately cabled a summary of the Kashag's new proposal back to Nanjing. Despite recommending that the Central Government tactfully reject the Tibetan proposal, due to its insistence that Tibet be permitted to handle its own foreign affairs, General Huang was optimistic that much of the proposal's language could serve as a basis for a future agreement restoring Sino-Tibetan relations. Once again, however, it was the Xikang border issue that blocked further discussions.<sup>50</sup> The Central Government was willing to grant Tibet a high degree of political and cultural autonomy within the framework of the traditional priest-patron relationship; however, it was not willing—or more to the point able—to accept the Tibetan government's repeated requests for the return of all land in Kham and Amdo to Tibetan administration. On November 10th, Wang Jingwei stressed to General Huang that “there is no possibility to negotiate the Xikang-Tibetan

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Kaxia han quanwen zhi Xingzheng Yuan deng dian” (Huang Musong's cable to the Executive Yuan and others with the complete text of the Kashag's October 17th letter), 19 October 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 232-33. On Huang Musong's orders to leave Lhasa see (Wang Jingwei), “Wang Tiaoming yi Xizang danggu yejing biaotai zhu dingqi huijing shi zhi Huang Musong dian” (Wang Jingwei's cable to Huang Musong about already informing the Tibetan authorities that he is returning to the capital within a set period), 19 October 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 234.

50 (Huang Musong), “Huang Musong wei wanju Kaxia shisan xiang koutou jianyi shi zhi Xingzheng Yuan dian” (Huang Musong's cable to the Executive Yuan stating his tactful refusal of the Kashag's thirteen-point oral proposal), 6 November 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 238-9.

dispute yourself.”<sup>51</sup> Huang Musong was again told to pack his bags for Nanjing.

Wang Jingwei did however authorize General Huang to draft one final counter-proposal before leaving Lhasa, but warned that he should reply with a personal letter rather than an official proposal on behalf of the Chinese government.<sup>52</sup> The exact nature of the General’s final proposal is unclear, and there does not appear to be an official record of it in the Chinese archives. According to one of the delegations’ political advisers, General Huang’s letter did not raise the contentious border issue but rather focused on the need to alter the language of the Tibetan proposal to ensure Central Government control over foreign policy and other national issues.<sup>53</sup> The account of Norbhu Döndup, the British-Indian officer in Lhasa, claims that Huang presented the Kashag with a detailed fourteen-point counter proposal. On the issue of the Tibetan-Xikang border, Döndup reports that the General’s plan agreed to recognize “the boundary existing at the time of the Emperor Guangxu,” namely the Yangtze River boundary agreed on in the 1932 armistice with Liu

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51 (Wang Jingwei), “Wang Tiaoming guanyu Kaxia yutan Kang-Xang jiufen yi Banzhan hui Zang wenti duice shi fu Huang Musong dian” (Wang Jingwei’s reply cable to Huang Musong about the policy concerning the Kashag’s insistence on discussing the Tibet-Xikang border issue and the question of the Panchen Lama’s return to Tibet), 10 November 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 240. Along with the border issue one of the other sticking points in the negotiations was the return of the Panchen Lama to Tibet, who had been in exile in China since 1923. The Tibetans were worried that the Panchen Lama would force his way back into Tibet (potentially with a large Chinese military escort) and thus insisted that he return via India where the British could monitor his entrance rather than overland through China. The Chinese repeatedly ensured the Tibetans that the Panchen Lama would not need a large military escort if he return overland from China. In this cable Wang Jingwei gives General Huang the authority to negotiate the exact nature of the Panchen Lama’s return.

52 (Wang Jingwei), “Wang Tiaoming guanyu Kaxia jiaobu qiebu ke zuo zhengshi hanjian bing cusu gui shi gu Huang Musong midian” (Wang Jingwei’s reply cable to Huang Musong stating that he must not send an official letter in negotiations with the Kashag and should quickly return to the Capital), 13 November 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 241.

53 Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 238-9 and Sun Zihe, *Xizang shishi yu renwu* (Tibet historical facts and personalities) (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu, 1995), 267-8

Wenhui.<sup>54</sup> In their otherwise positive reply to the General's proposal, the Kashag demonstrated some flexibility on the border issue, but again rejected Huang Musong's proposed solution to the Xikang problem. The Tibetans were willing to concede control over much of Amdo (Qinghai), but not Kham (Xikang), where Liu Wenhui's 24<sup>th</sup> Army continued to pose a direct threat to their government's future stability. The Kashag's reply stated:

In order to improve Sino-Tibet relations while avoiding future disputes and stabilizing the border region, the northeastern boundary between Qinghai and Tibet should be maintained as proposed the year before last [1932], with Golok, which has long been under Tibet, to be included on the Tibetan side. As for the boundary between Tibet and Sichuan, the territory and people of Dege, Nyarong, Ganzè and the Targye monastery should be turned over to the Tibetan government at the earliest possible date.<sup>55</sup>

The Kashag's final response made it clear that their overriding concern was the creation of a buffer zone in western Xikang to protect Tibet from any future aggression by General Liu Wenhui and his 24<sup>th</sup> Army.

The Kuomintang Government adopted a flexible and pragmatic approach to the resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations, offering Tibet a high degree of autonomy if it was willing to recognize Chinese sovereignty; yet, the Tibetans continued to insist on a concrete solution to the one issue that the Central Government was not in a political position to resolve. While Huang Musong was in Lhasa negotiating with the Tibetan authorities, Chiang Kai-shek's troops had the Chinese Communists on the ropes and were chasing a tired Red Army north through Yunnan towards the Yangtze River. With the Communists set to cross the border into Xikang, Chiang Kai-shek had no

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54 Cited in Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 236-9.

55 (Huang Musong), "Huang Musong wei chenbao Kaxia lai han suoti shi xiang tiaojian bing niji hui jing shi zhi Xingzheng Yuan deng dian" (Huang Musong's cable to the Executive Yuan and others reporting the Kashag's ten-point proposal and his intentions to immediately return to the Capital), 16 November 1934, in *ZMSD*, 5.1.5: 242-43.

hope of dealing Mao's Communists a final blow without the support of Liu Wenhui's 24<sup>th</sup> Army. Not only would Liu Wenhui never agree to Tibetan control over western Xikang, there was also the real possibility that a Tibetan controlled Kham might provide safe haven for the Communists. When it came to the struggle against the Communists, General Liu Wenhui appeared to be a more important ally than the Tibetans. Rather than alienating General Liu, Chiang Kai-shek tried to draw him closer to the Central Government, declaring the Central Government's intention to finance the creation of a new province in Xikang and naming Liu Wenhui chairman of the preparatory committee. With negotiation on the Xikang border issue at a deadlock, Huang Musong left Lhasa and all eyes shifted to the impending struggle against the Chinese Communists in Xikang.

#### **IV. Wu Zhongxin's Mission & the Failure of Sino-Tibetan**

##### **Rapprochement, Part II**

Despite the fact that the 24<sup>th</sup> Army did little to prevent the Red Army's march northward through Xikang—choosing to hide inside city walls rather than engage the Communists troops—the importance of Liu Wenhui's regime only increased with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>56</sup> Following the fall of Shanghai in late 1937, Chiang Kai-shek announced plans to move the

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<sup>56</sup> Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 104 & 136-41; Liu, *Frontier Passages*, 89-90. Xiaoyuan Liu argues that Chiang Kai-shek instructed Liu Wenhui to focus on the movement of the Tibetan army instead of the Communists, "prioritizing the Tibetan question over the Communist question in southwestern China" (p. 89). This analysis overlooks the fact that the Kuomintang Central Government was powerless to force the 24<sup>th</sup> Army to engage the Communists and that the 24<sup>th</sup> Army had no interest in wasting its precious resources on the Communist sojourners. In fact, Chiang Kai-shek would have most certainly been frustrated by the fact that during their nearly eight month stay in the Ganzê region in northern Xikang, Liu Wenhui's forces "never fired a shot," in words of Zhang Guotao, at the Communists. It would be interesting to explore the extent and nature of contact between Liu's 24<sup>th</sup> Army and the Red Army during this period.

Central Government's capital from Nanjing to Chongqing, where he hoped to rely on the newly constructed Burma Road to receive crucial British and American lend-lease supplies. The importance of Chiang's "rear flank" intensified as the Japanese economic blockage tightened and the coastal regions of Canton and Hainan Island fell into enemy hands. Finally, when Churchill, fearing a Japanese invasion of Burma, closed the Burma Road for several months in 1939, Chiang Kai-shek began to think seriously about an alternative route to bring vital outside supplies into China. To the dismay of his British allies, Chiang proposed the construction of another road linking colonial India with China, this time through Tibet and Xikang.<sup>57</sup> Chiang understood that the success of this project hinged on the successful solution of the Kham/Xikang border problem. As a result, he decided to renew the Kuomintang's efforts at securing an agreement with the Tibetan government while also attempting to loosen Liu Wenhui's control over the contentious Xikang border region.

Using the discovery of the new Dalai Lama as a pretext, the Central Government informed the Tibetans on 29 March 1939 that it wanted to send the new chairman of the CMTA, Wu Zhongxi, to attend the Dalai Lama's enthronement ceremony in Lhasa. Following a period of delay, the Tibetan government granted the request on the condition that Wu's mission travel to Lhasa through India.<sup>58</sup> Before departing, Chairman Wu Zhongxin submitted a written proposal to the Central Government's Executive Yuan outlining his suggested strategy for negotiations with the Tibetan authorities. In his report,

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<sup>57</sup> F.F. Liu, *A Military History of Modern China, 1924-1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956): 202-208; Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 378-81.

<sup>58</sup> On Wu Zhongxin's mission see Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet*, 325-330; Li, *The Historical Status of Tibet*, 180-87.

Wu stressed the importance of Tibet to China's national defense objectives during the Sino-Japanese war. He argued that the Kuomintang needed to be extremely flexible in pursuing all avenues possible for securing the assistance of Tibetan authorities in China's war efforts. Wu called for a continuation of Huang Musong's cautious methods in dealing with the Tibetan Kashag, gradually building up goodwill in Lhasa while avoiding anything that might increase tension with China's British allies.<sup>59</sup>

Wu Zhongxin's proposal received the personal endorsement of Chiang Kai-shek and the Executive Yuan.<sup>60</sup> In its formal reply to Wu's plan, the Executive Yuan stated that experience has proven that a "conciliatory policy" (*huairou zhengce*) was the correct method for dealing with the Tibetan problem. They provided the CMTA with a detailed, eleven-point guideline for its talks with the Tibetans. The first point stated that in exchange for recognizing Tibet as a part of China, the Central Government would promise not to convert Tibet into a province and "based on a special type of autonomy, permit the preservation of the Tibetan theocratic system of government."<sup>61</sup> Given the urgency of reaching an agreement with the Tibetans, the Central Government was also willing to go a step beyond Huang Musong's negotiating position by allowing the Tibetans not only political and cultural autonomy but also the right to conduct their own foreign policy. The Executive

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59 (Wu Zhongxin), "Wu Zhongxin niju ruzang renwu yu zuzhi ji jingfei yijian zhi xingzhengyuan zhecheng" (The submission of Wu Zhongxin's draft ideas to the Executive Yuan on the finances, organisation and responsibilities for the mission to Tibet), 4 August 1939, in *ZMSD*, 5.2.4: 454-55 & 462-63.

60 (Chiang Kai-shek), "Jiang Jieshi qing Wu Zhongxin dao Zanghou dui rezhen ji Zangzhong zhongyao renyuan youjia lianluo dian (Chiang Kai-shek's cable to Wu Zhongxin enthusiastically encouraging his trip to Tibet to improve communication with Tibetan officials), 11 September 1939, in *ZMSD*, 5.2.4: 467.

61 "Xingzhengyuan chaosong ruzang tanhua yaozhi shiyixiang gei Wu Zhongxin xunling" (Copy of Executive Yuan order given to Wu Zhongxin concern 11 negotiating guidelines for his mission to Tibet), September 1939, in *ZMSD*, 5.2.4: 469.

Yuan only asked that in the realm of foreign diplomacy, the Tibetan government abide by all the international agreements the Kuomintang Government had signed with foreign countries. On the intractable border issues, point nine of the outline stated:

With regards to the Tibet-Xikang border problem, the Tibetan government and the Xikang provincial government should consult one another and then request the ratification of any agreement by the Central Government; or alternatively, the Tibetans can seek a direct public solution of the problem with the Central Government based on a detailed discussion of geographic and related conditions.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, the Executive Yuan asked Wu Zhongxin to stress to the Kashag that the entire country was now united behind the Central Government in its struggle against the Japanese military and events similar to the “revolt of the Sichuan army” were now impossible. As such, the Tibetans should no longer harbor any doubts about the ability of the Central Government to govern the frontier.<sup>63</sup>

Chiang Kai-shek realized that the success of Wu Zhongxin’s mission to Lhasa hinged on the ability of the Central Government to wrestle control of the disputed Xikang border region away from Liu Wenhui. He anticipated that the Tibetans would once again make the solution to the border issue a precondition for the resumption of Sino-Tibetan relations, and without Central Government control over Xikang a road linking Chongqing with India could never be built. Chiang attempted to weaken Liu Wenhui’s grip over Xikang through a series of tactical and covert actions aimed at destabilizing his regime.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

First, Chiang hoped to spark conflict between Liu Wenhui, Yunnanese warlord Long Yun and Sichuan militarist Deng Xihou. In early 1938, the Central Government finally granted Liu Wenhui's repeated requests for the formal creation of Xikang Province. At the same time, the Government also approved Liu's old 1928 plan calling for the addition of the rich opium producing region of Ningshu and wealthy tea growing areas of Ya'an to the territory of the new province. At the time, Ningshu was under the indirect control of Long Yun while Ya'an was the power-base of Deng Xihou. Chiang hoped that, by redrawing the administrative lines along the Xikang-Yunnan-Sichuan borders, this would spark open conflict among the warlords and weaken their resistance to Kuomintang control.<sup>64</sup> Unfortunately for Chiang, his plan backfired. Rather than fighting over the borders of the new Xikang province, the warlords decided to band together against their common enemy. During the summer of 1938, Liu Wenhui, Long Yun and Deng Xihou met and signed a secret agreement calling for military, economic and political cooperation against Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang regime.<sup>65</sup>

Around the same time, Chiang also tried to use the supporters of the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama to spark a revolt in the Ganzê region of northern Xikang. Following a dispute with the Dalai Lama in 1923, the 9<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama and his followers escaped Tibet for China, where they lived in exile first in Inner

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64 Hu Gongxian and Liu Yuanxuan, "Liu Wenhui he Jiang Jieshi zai Ningshu de mingzheng yindou" (The open strife and veiled struggle between Liu Wenhui and Chiang Kaishek in Ningshu), in Sichuansheng zhengxie wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui (comp.) *Sichuan wenshi ziliao jicu: diwujuan: minzu zongjiao huajiao bian (Select collection of materials on Sichuan history and culture: Volume 5: Nationality, religion, and oversea Chinese)* (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 1996): 185-96 (Hereafter cited as SWZJ).

65 Ren Yimin, "Liu Wenhui," in Sichuan sheng difang zhibianzuan weiyuanhui shengzhi renwu zhi bianji zubian (comp.), *Sichuan jinxiandai renwuzhuan (Biographies of contemporary Sichuan personalities)* (Chengdu: Sichuan sheng shehui kexueyuan chubanshe, 1986- ), 1: 104.

Mongolia and then at the Kumbum monastery in Qinghai province. Attempting to court the Panchen Lama as a possible counterbalance to the Dalai Lama, the Kuomintang provided the Panchen with lofty sounding titles, a large government stipend and military supplies for a possible forced return to Tibet. Yet, before the Panchen could return, he died in exile in late 1937.<sup>66</sup> With the approval, if not active encouragement, of the Kuomintang, the Panchen's supporters decided to move the body of their late leader and his political headquarters - which now comprised over one thousand followers, several hundred head of cattle and a security detachment armed with over ten thousand imported guns - to Ganzê in northern Xikang. During the summer of 1938, Chiang Kai-shek dispatched one of his top frontier policy advisers, Dai Jitao, to Ganzê under the pretext of paying the Central Government's respects to the late Panchen Lama. While in Ganzê, Dai Jitao gave at least tacit encouragement to a secret plan among some of Panchen's supporters to wrestle control of western Xikang from Liu Wenhui's 24<sup>th</sup> Army and transform it into the permanent base of the next Panchen under Kuomintang patronage; and, according to one Communist historian, Dai Jitao even actively plotted the overthrow of Liu Wenhui with the supporters of the Panchen Lama.<sup>67</sup>

With the support of Dai Jitao, the Panchen's followers forged an alliance with the Ganzê *tusi* (tribal chieftain) and began rallying the local population, under the slogan "Xikang people rule Xikang," in resistance to Liu Wenhui's local garrison commander Zhang Zhenzhong. When Liu Wenhui

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66 On the Panchen Lama's exile and Kuomintang-backed attempt to return to Tibet see Parshotam Mehra, *Tibetan Polity, 1904-37: The Conflict between the 13th Dalai Lama and the 9th Panchen : a case study* (Wiesbaden : O. Harrassowitz, 1976).

67 Feng Youzhi, *Xikangshi shiyi*, 335-36; Luojiangze, Luonima, and Luoxini "Huiyi Ganzi shibian jingguo" (The process of the Ganzê incident), in *SWZJ*, 5: 19.

ordered that the female *tusi* be placed under house arrest in order to block her announced marriage to the commander of the Panchen's military guards, the Tibetans revolted. Following a brief struggle in November 1939, the well-armed Tibetans easily captured Ganzê, forcing Zhang Zhenzhong to commit suicide. While plans were underway to capture other towns in western Xikang, Liu Wenhui organized a counter-attack. He dispatched two of his top military commanders and nearly 2000 of his best soldiers to regain control of the region. Following a week of bloody fighting, which saw over 300 casualties and the death of one of Liu's commanders, the 24<sup>th</sup> Army recaptured Ganzê, forcing the Panchen's supporters and the Ganzê *tusi* to flee into Qinghai.<sup>68</sup> Angered by the revolt, officials within Liu Wenhui's regime repeated calls for a military campaign extending Xikang's territory westward onto the Tibetan plateau, setting off another wave of panic in Lhasa.<sup>69</sup> Chiang Kai-shek's plans for destabilizing Liu Wenhui's regime had once again backfired.

In Lhasa, Wu Zhongxin's negotiations did not fare much better. As expected, the Kashag continued to insist on a solution to the Xikang border issue prior to the resumption of formal relations with China. In their 2 April 1940 written reply to Wu Zhongxin's request for talks on the improvement of Sino-Tibetan communications, the Kashag reiterated the Tibetan position that those areas under Liu Wenhui's control in Kham, such as Dergê, Ganzê and Nyarong, be returned to direct Tibetan control, and indicated that until this issue was resolved they would not discuss the improvement of relations. The Kashag blamed the disruption in Sino-Tibetan relations on "the various border

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68 Feng Youzhi, *Xikangshi shiyi*, 336-50; Luojiangze, Luonima, and Luoxini "Huiyi Ganzi shibian jingguo," 5: 19-36.

69 Cited in Li, *The Historical Status of Tibet*, 187.

officials who do not abide by the Central Government's orders" and have instead forcefully occupied Kham, causing the Tibetan government to waste large sums of money in maintaining an army along the border.<sup>70</sup> With negotiations once again stuck on the border issue, Wu Zhongxin left Lhasa on 14 April without an agreement.

Throughout the war years, Chiang Kai-shek continued his efforts to bring Liu Wenhui's 24<sup>th</sup> Army under direct Central Government control, realizing that this was the key to solving the Tibetan problem. Yet, as Robert Kapp has pointed out, "handling the Sichuanese commanders and their armies during the war against Japan was a serious problem for the Chinese Nationalists, who could ill afford to wage an all-out struggle against dissatisfied and potentially rebellious provincial forces in the heart of government-held territory."<sup>71</sup> Without the direct use of force, Chiang Kai-shek tried unsuccessfully to beguile, strong-arm and even bribe Liu Wenhui into submission. Yet, his 24<sup>th</sup> Army maintained a firm grip on the region up until, and even after, the Communist victory in 1949. It was only when he was faced with the superior firepower of the Red Army in December 1949 that he decided to throw his lot in with the Communists.<sup>72</sup>

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70 A complete copy of the Kashag's 2 April 1940 letter is contained in Wu Zhongxin's formal report to the Central Government on his failed mission to Lhasa, see (Wu Zhongxin), "Wu Zhongxin fengpai ruzang zhuchi dishisi shi Dalai Lama zuochuang dianli baogao" (Wu Zhongxin's report on his mission to Tibet to preside over the enthronement of the 14th Dalai Lama), June 1940, in *ZMSD*, 5.2.4: 526-7.

71 Kapp, *Szechwan and the Chinese Republic*, 140.

72 After defecting to the Communists in December 1949, Liu Wenhui was named as Vice Chairman of the Southwest Military and Administrative Committee of the PRC where he assisted the Red Army's Southwest Military District (under the leadership of Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping) with its invasion of Tibet. In addition to serving as a member of the National Defence Council, Liu was appointed Minister of Forestry in 1959. See "Liu Wenhui" in Boorman and Howard (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, 2: 419; Ren Yimin, "Liu Wenhui," 1: 106.

## **V. Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated the complex interaction between several political and ethnic actors on Republican China's Tibetan frontier. It shows how Liu Wenhui and his warlord regime manipulated nationalist discourse to protect their own autonomy from Central Government encroachment while attracting the Han settlers necessary to colonize Xikang and "civilize" its ethnic minorities in the name of "national unity" and "national development." An inherently weak Kuomintang Central Government, for its part, promised the Tibetans a high degree of autonomy in exchange for a pledge of allegiance to the Central Government and its new national imaginary, the *Zhonghua minzu*; at the same time, however, it was also forced to rely on warlords like Liu Wenhui to push state/Han authority into the furthest corners of the frontier in countering imperialists' and communists' intrigue. The Tibetans under the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and Reting Rimpoche, in turn, looked to the Central Government for assistance in checking the aggression and military adventurism of Liu Wenhui and his 24<sup>th</sup> Army, making the resolution of their frequent and costly skirmishes a *quid pro quo* for any recognition of Chinese sovereignty. The reality of this complex triangular struggle for power along the Tibetan frontier forces us to re-evaluate the nature of "provincialism" and "nationalism" in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China.

In recent years, several scholars have attempted to "de-construct" the nation as the grand narrative of Chinese history by highlighting the role of regional "warlords" in promoting an alternative vision of Chinese sovereignty built around provincial autonomy and often set within a federalist framework.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History From the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 177-204 and John Fitzgerald,

In the case of Tan Yankai in Hunan or Chen Jiongming in Guangdong, these narratives of provincial self-rule developed in conversation with the centralizing narrative of the Nationalists Government which invested the nation in the territorial boundaries of the Qing empire rather than the historical and cultural traditions of a single province. In the case of the ethnic frontiers of Republican China, Uradyn Bulag argues that the discourse of ethnic autonomy adds another layer of complexity to the process of “imaging” the Chinese nation-state.<sup>74</sup> While at times, narratives of ethnic identity intersected with the movement for regional autonomy, as in the case of the Hui Muslim warlords of Gansu studied by Jonathan Lipman,<sup>75</sup> other frontier areas operated in a more sinuous environment. Along the Sino-Tibetan frontier, the local versus centre power dialogue between Liu Wenhui’s Xikang regime and the Kuomintang Central Government was complicated by competing narratives of ethnic autonomy and liberation, on the one hand, and the discourse of modernity with its call for “civilizing” and “assimilating” of the “backward” ethnic minorities of the frontier.

This political web of interaction reminds us of the limitations of a static center-periphery or state-local model of social change. In liminal frontier zones, like the Tibetan highlands, political actors operated in a complex, circuitous and multilayered environment with multiple centers of authority. Jonathan Friedman was one of the first scholars to identify the “independent structures” which operate outside a statist center-periphery model.<sup>76</sup> His

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*Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 147-179

<sup>74</sup> Bulag, *The Mongols at China’s Edge*, 29-62.

<sup>75</sup> Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*, *passim*.

<sup>76</sup> Jonathan Friedman, *System, Structure and Contradiction: The Evolution of*

category of “parasitic” or “predatory” polities that operate in the seams of large states and empires has clear parallel to General Liu Wenhui’s regime. His exploitation of the frontier – namely through the cultivation and exportation of opium – disrupted the centralizing ambitions of both Lhasa and Nanjing while his use of modern, revolutionary language helped to rationalize his autonomous rule. Many current models of state building fit uncomfortably on postcolonial and developing countries like China which until quite recently lacked the coercive authority and centralizing tendency of Western nation-states. In his classic study on the Great Lake regions of North America, Richard White describes a cultural and political “middle ground” where Native Americans and Europeans interacted as equals in the fluid spatial matrix that existed prior to the development and use of superior firepower by the English after the War of 1812.<sup>77</sup> David Bello and Pat Giersch have pointed to the existence of a similar middle ground in Southern Yunnan as the Qing state came face-to-face with the fiercely independent tribal cultures on this remote frontier of the Qing empire, while Prasenjit Duara has recently explored competing narratives of sovereignty and authenticity in the Manchurian “borderland” of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>78</sup> During the Republican period both the

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*'Asiatic' Social Formations* (Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark, 1979); Jonathan Friedman, “Generalized Exchange, Theocracy and the Opium Trade,” *Critique of Anthropology*, 7.1 (1987): 15-31. I am grateful to an anonymous *Chinese Historical Review* referee for bring the work of Friedman to my attention.

<sup>77</sup> Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>78</sup> David A. Bello, “To Go Where No Han Could Go for Long: Malaria and the Qing Construction of Ethnic Administrative Space in Frontier Yunnan,” *Modern China*, 31.3 (July 2005): 283-317; Pat C. Giersch, “‘A Motley Throng’: Social Change on Southwest China’s Early Modern Frontier,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 60.1 (2001): 67-94; Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2003). The concept of a liminal borderland that is historically positioned in between the concept of a premodern imperial frontier and clearly defined territorial boundaries of a modern nation-state was developed by Adelman and Aron in

Kuomintang and the Chinese Communists lacked the administrative, financial and military resources necessary to impose their will along China's massive frontier zones, and as a result, its frontier regions remained a contested ethnic and political spaces.

In his path-breaking study on the Thai geo-body, Thongchai Winichakul highlights the historic tension between a premodern conception of space and sovereignty, where political and cultural boundaries did not necessarily overlap, and the modern discourse of geography and the nation which delineates clear and unambiguous boundaries between fully sovereign states.<sup>79</sup> The repeated attempt by Chinese, British and Tibetan officials to "map" the contested Kham/Xikang border failed to impose order on the shifting cultural polygot that lived along this ethnic penumbra. Anthropologist Geoffrey Samuel argues that it is a mistake to view pre-1950s Tibet as a centralized or even decentralized state – rather, as a "stateless society," sovereignty was conceived of as a series of overlapping societies set within a single cultural and religious milieu.<sup>80</sup> In Kham, authority was exercised through a series of hereditary kings, chiefs and reincarnated lamas that functioned outside the direct political control of Lhasa in a fashion that mirrored the autonomy of Liu Wenhui's Xikang regime. Arguing that a linear frontier on a map often functions in reality as "a zone rather than a line," Owen Lattimore highlighted the "ambivalent loyalties" of those living in these frontier zones, where economic self-interest

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Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-states and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review*, 104 (June 1999): 814-841.

<sup>79</sup> Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, 62-112 & *passim*.

<sup>80</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, "Tibet as a Stateless Society and Some Islamic Parallels." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 41:2 (1982): 215-29.

often compromises ethnic, political and even religious loyalties.<sup>81</sup> In Carole McGranahan's recent discussion of the disputed Sino-Tibetan border, she puts forward a "contested" model of the boundary which aims to bringing together the "united model" of the Tibetan government-in-exile (which combines Tibet proper, Kham and Amdo into a single polity often referred to as "ethnographic Tibet") and the "colonial model" of the PRC (which continues to make the distinction between the Tibetan Autonomous Region and its neighboring provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Qinghai and Xinjiang) through the recognition of the intertwined and contested nature of both government's claims.<sup>82</sup> Yet, this analysis overlooks yet another dimension of this contested border, a premodern conception of sovereignty located in the liminal, transcultural geobody of an intermediate frontier zone. In fact, despite their constant warfare, the one thing that united the Tibetans of Kham and the Chinese of Xikang was their desire to maintain their autonomy from both Lhasa and Nanjing. Kesang Tsering, one of the Kuomintang officials charged with establishing Central Government control in the region, learned this first hand when his failed 1932 uprising in Batang was defeated by an unlikely coalition of forces from the Kham militia, the Tibetan army and Liu Wenhui's 24<sup>th</sup> Army.<sup>83</sup>

Operating within the confines of these contested and shifting notions of sovereignty and space in Republican China, it should not surprise us that the Kuomintang Central Government adopted a cautious and conservative approach to the frontier question. What is perhaps more surprising is the

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81 Owen Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," in *Studies in Frontier History*, 469-70.

82 McGranahan, "Empire and the Status of Tibet," 285-88.

83 Goldstein, Sherap, and Siebenschuh, *A Tibetan Revolutionary*, 10-14.

language they employed in rationalizing their policy. It merged elements of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary discourse of *minzuzhuyi* with the historical and administrative precedents of Qing China. Stability and peace along the frontier were viewed as crucial to the consolidation of Kuomintang power. During times of military weakness, like the late Qing and Republican periods, the Chinese state adopted a compromising (*rouxing*) and loose rein (*jimi*) strategy aimed at drawing the frontier and its elites towards the political centre. For centuries, Chinese dynasties had been toppled by rebellions which originated and festered along the frontier before threatening the Chinese heartland. Much like their Qing predecessors, the Kuomintang State was quick to realize the merits of the traditional saying that "turmoil on the frontier brings rebellion to the interior" (*bianjiang yiri bujing, neidi yiri buan*).<sup>84</sup> The government's ability to maintain peace along the frontier was the ultimate signifier of its strength, authority and majesty. And during times of weakness, the state sought to secure "tribute" or symbolic recognition from the "external vassals" (*waifan*) in order to create the illusion of national unity and moral superiority. Yet, unlike Liu Wenhui and to a certain extent even the Tibetan government in Lhasa, Chinese political leaders (both Kuomintang and Chinese Communist Party) were quick to realize the importance of diplomacy in the new international system of nation-states in mapping and clearly demarcating the boundaries of the nation's geobody. Throughout the 20th Century the Chinese state consistently asserted Chinese sovereignty over the threaten frontier regions of the former Qing empire and resisted attempts by the British (in Tibet),

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84 Ma Ruheng and Zhao Yuntian, "Qingdai bianjiang," 1.

Russians (in Xinjiang and Mongolia) and Japanese (in Manchuria, Mongolia and then all of China) to invade and dismember the Chinese nation-state.

It is slightly ironic, yet far from surprising, that the Communist Party-state adopted the civilizing discourse of the Han warlords after their victory in 1949. For those frontier militarists who were peacefully co-opted into the Communist regime, such as Liu Wenhui in Xikang and Fu Zuoyi in Inner Mongolia, the Party-state praised their Herculean efforts at “developing the frontier,” “resisting foreign imperialism” and “assisting the frontier minorities.” By heaping the past history of exploitation on the Kuomintang Central Government, Communist scholars downplayed the involvement of these so-called “champions of national unity” in the forced colonization and exploitation of frontier resources.<sup>85</sup> Rather their assimilationist policies are blamed on Chiang Kai-shek and his unspecified “reactionary regime,” who far from offering the Tibetans and Mongols culture and political autonomy called for their forced incorporation into a single, racially pure *Zhonghua minzu*. This oversimplification of Kuomintang national minority policy has been perpetuated in Western language scholarship on China with June Dreyer, for example, claiming that Liu Wenhui and other frontier warlords “had a reputation for equal treatment of minorities and for making an honest attempt to deal with their grievances” while, in comparison, the Kuomintang’s “inept” minority policy greatly contributed to its poor reputation along the frontier.<sup>86</sup> Unlike the Kuomintang, the Communist Party-state has the material and military resources to impose its authority on the frontier, transforming its

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<sup>85</sup> See for example, Ren Yimin, “Liu Wenhui,” 101-107; Zhang Xinwu, *Fu Zuoyi Yisheng (The Life of Fu Zuoyi)* (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1995).

<sup>86</sup> Dreyer, *China's Forty Million*, 40.

national imaginary of a unified *Zhonghua minzu* into a political reality. This highlights the importance of reading Chinese secondary sources with caution, counteracting the natural tendency of PRC historiography to project a unitary and homogenous Chinese nation-state onto the much more dynamic periods that preceded it. This tendency to read national history backwards not only distorts the historical record it also plays into the hands of state-sponsored nationalism and its attempts to consolidate and reinforce its political power and “erase” alternative formulations of the Chinese nation.

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