

A Frontier Made Lawless

Violence in Upland Southwest
China, 1800–1956

JOSEPH LAWSON



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Introduction

In the nineteenth century and for the first half of the twentieth, large regions of upland southwest China experienced prolonged outbreaks of conflict of a sort that has – with variations – accompanied processes of colonization in many areas of the world. State forces fought alongside and against a chaotic range of groups organized for violence: paramilitaries, militias, guerrillas, bandits, and clan or tribal groups. Among the grievances was land. Indigenous people experienced the loss of their land through purchases, theft, trickery, and cultural miscommunication. Members of migrant communities complained of times that land they had worked on hard had been seized by natives, who, they believed, had never used it for anything useful. Fighting was exacerbated by ethnic tensions, though people did not always fight on the side of those to whom they were culturally similar. There were the common strategies of guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency. The state marked zones of “bandit-infested wilderness” and starved or otherwise persecuted populations supposed to be supporting the shadowy enemies within. Multiple parties used illicit drugs and kidnappings to fund weapons. Tough terrain – mountains and forests – made state suppression of rebels hard, though romantic notions of guerrillas in remote mountain strongholds ignore the difficulties faced by fighters who went to such places. Either despite the chaos – or precisely because of it – state officials formulated grand development plans for the cultivation of land, the opening of mines, and other resource extraction industries, the attempted implementation of which fuelled further cycles of dispossession and conflict.

This book explores group violence in Liangshan, the “Cool Mountains” in southwest Sichuan. Recurrent in Liangshan’s history are episodes like the following, drawn from the memoir of Leng Guangdian (1913–89, Nuosu name Nzymo Munyie), the scion of an elite family in northern Liangshan.¹ In March 1925, a Han household from a hamlet called Yueshi invited a *bimo*, a priest from the Nuosu ethnic group, from some way away to perform rituals in their home. The *bimo* stayed a few days and became familiar with the hamlet and its surroundings. After he left, according to Leng, he returned with a couple of others to rob the household. Whether Leng had evidence the *bimo* was the burglar is unclear. The family themselves believed it was the “Yi” (the common Chinese label for the Nuosu) of nearby Shi’amo, and they went there to take up their case. The Nuosu of Shi’amo and the burgled family went to the offices of an ally of Leng Guangdian’s, Yang Ren’an, an autonomous military commander who was, so a foreign traveller heard, “extremely pro-Lolo [Nuosu]” and had “tribal blood in his veins.”² Yang’s mediation did not help, and the dispute got worse. The Shi’amo Nuosu were forced to flee their homes and took refuge in Luoluo Creek. There they joined up with local youths, who kidnapped Han women and stole their horses. (Kidnapping was a common element of violence in Liangshan, and many accounts of confrontations suggest more kidnapping than killing. It was a way of extracting ransoms, getting hostages to hold as surety against enemy raids, acquiring slaves, and bringing opponents to negotiate [likely a motivation in this case]. Capturing women was less usual; when women were kidnapped, writers usually hinted at sexual violence, though in this case, Leng did not.)³ A member of the Han gentry, Wang Xuyuan, wanted to negotiate (which typically meant paying ransoms), but another local, Gu Chengzhai, argued that the situation called for force. Gu won the argument and a Han militia was assembled. Their attack failed and Gu himself was taken captive. His release was secured after many rounds of talks (and likely payment too). Soon afterwards, the Nuosu warrior Amu Yue-dan was lured into captivity, and the Han took him to Tianba. Leng was studying in Tianba at the time. “With my own eyes, I saw Amu Yue-dan tied to a pillar in a room. Passing Han beat him with sticks and burned him with incense and cigarettes; his body was a mass of bruises.” The Nuosu of Luoluo Creek heard about this and got ready to come to his rescue “and punish the Han.” But the local Han military commander, Liu Ji’nan – whom Leng regarded as a “warlord” – warned them not to make any trouble and to wait for him to resolve the situation. The Nuosu obeyed and waited for Liu:

But Liu was not true to his word. When he arrived at Luoluo Creek, he attacked the Nuosu and killed many of them. Afterwards

he came to Tianba, where he ordered that Amu Yue-dan, already on the verge of death from torture, be doused in kerosene and burnt alive. Even now, the terrible scene is still vivid in my mind.⁴

This book makes no claim that Liangshan was more violent than any other place in China in this era – it is not a comparative study. But any reading of memoirs, travel narratives, court records, and official reports from Liangshan reveal that violence and attempts to prevent it were core concerns for many of the region's residents in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reports of lynching and other forms of violence enacted by people who were not part of formal military units are common in these sources. In the late 1830s, Ošan, the governor general of Sichuan, reported the aftermath of a punitive expedition against a group of Nuosu deemed to be responsible for a raid on a Han village. Commanders “led the fierce Yi (*xiong Yi*) Yuanhu and eighty-nine other captives to the scene of their crimes, and gathered the people to watch the punishment for their satisfaction. The Han victims vied with one another to tear at their flesh.”⁵ In the 1940s, the American missionary Ralph Covell arrived in Liangshan, and witnessed similarly bloody scenes: “During my first few days living in Lugu, I was horrified to see a man casually walking through the streets carrying on his back a basket filled with ten Nosu [*sic*] heads, still dripping blood.”⁶ Large numbers of Chinese and Nuosu were killed in combat, kidnapped, held captive for many years, enslaved, starved by enemies who stole their food, and summarily executed.

A source of conceptual difficulty to be stated at the outset is that “violence” is constructed as a distinct category of problematic behaviour when it transgresses some norm or rule held by a group or institution. Therefore our knowledge of it is bound up with the interpretative frameworks of those individuals, groups, or institutions that see it as transgressive. The same action might be violence or not, depending on context and interpretation; striking another person might be seen as sport or discipline, a duty, or an assault. Interpretations that construct an action as violent are contested and embedded within particular genres, with their own conventions and purposes.

The reports Qing commanders made to the throne, for example, focused overwhelmingly on justifying the use of state military force, and on the course and outcome of campaigns. They labelled their opponents with broad, vague terms, such as “bandits” or “rebels” who had committed transgressions against the state or “peaceful” communities. Reports of homicide cases constructed transgressive behaviour differently, treating those involved in different ways. The reports of occupations

and home villages, homicide reports gave no sense that these individuals' actions and motivations might be generalizable to others within a given category (like "bandit" or "Yi"). But at times, only historical contingency meant an event became part of a murder case rather than an episode of rebellion or pacification to be written about by a military commander. Had any of the events described by Leng Guangdian above been represented within a legal case, or within a report to a superior military commander, the categories of analysis, the identification of the participants, and the construction of the nature of the "problem" would have been different. As it was, Leng's narrative presented them within a gory but nostalgia-tinted account of "times past" (*wang xi*), the violence of which was associated with "warlords" who were now beyond the reach of justice or political action – not only through their death, but also through a construction of time that put them in a vanished era. Therefore, Leng's narrative aimed not to prove a case for action against any particular individual or group (as legal case documents or reports of a military campaign did), but to tell the story of an era that post-1949 historiography had firmly sectioned off and distanced from the present. Within this view of violence, individual and group actors were like blurred brushstrokes on a canvas that aimed to depict (or indict) a whole political *milieu*. As this book will show, the way that comparable behaviours were framed – either as "violence" or as normalized within judicial-administrative institutions – could powerfully affect the way that conflicts were interpreted, with important consequences.

From the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese political leaders and educated travellers wrote more synthetically about violence in Liangshan. Rather than writing about particular events, they constructed conflict in the region as a generalized phenomenon consisting of innumerable instances of repeating but individually unpredictable and disorganized violence, creating new genres and epistemologies of violence as they did so. Reports and journal articles read by political elites conceptualized conflict in the region as a "scourge" (*huan*) or "chaos" (*luan*) wrought by the Yi. The "Yi scourge" was part of what Republican period (1912–49) sources called the "Yi problem" (*Yi wu wenti*). This interpretation elicited a response from Nuosu literate in Chinese and a small number of Han sympathetic to them, who retained the same ethnic labels and style of analysis but reversed the judgments: "The Yi people feel that the Han regions and people are a danger to their existence. From their point of view, the 'Yi problem' is really the 'Han problem' (*Han wu wenti*)."⁷ Even the Republican-period Han warlord Liu Wenhui wrote that "the

Han people talk of the Yi scourge, and the Yi people talk of the Han scourge (*Han huan*),” and other writers played with the same idea.⁸ “In the Yi haunts (*Yi chao*) there is a saying ‘when the Han come the Yi are finished’ (*Han dao Yi jue*), which is deeply impressed in their minds,” wrote one agent of the Guomindang (Nationalist) Party in 1939.⁹ In the sense that the paradigm constructed a generalized pattern of ongoing disorganized group violence, the interpretive frame was similar to the twentieth-century Western idea of “ethnic conflict,” though the accounts from Liangshan tended to explicitly blame one side or the other. Like “ethnic conflict,” the interpretation tended to propose its own solution: the establishment of robust, modern state institutions that could bring law to a land whose lawlessness was seen to be rooted in premodern ethnic affiliations and hatreds.

The point here is not that everything depended on how violence was constructed in discourse. There really were different sorts of events: government-led attempts to bring the region under state control, looting by Han or Nuosu bandits, attempts by Nuosu landowners to get the rents they understood were owed to them, attempts by Han settlers to resist eviction by Nuosu landlords, and captive-taking by Nuosu and Han militias. The question of whether “lawlessness” could likewise refer to an identifiable condition beyond discourse is worth pausing on. Weberian sociology suggests that lands without a state cannot have a true rule of law, because legal authority requires the support of a state with a more or less successful monopoly on the power to determine what counts as legitimate use of violence. Although self-governing nonstate groups such as the Nuosu have their own practices of law, the conventional assumption is that no laws govern relations among different groups living beyond the reach of a state, such as the Nuosu and neighbouring ethnic groups.¹⁰ But anarchist and libertarian scholars have argued that interactions between members of such groups can, in fact, be conducted according to negotiated agreements and customary codes of conduct that function a lot like “law.”¹¹ The danger of this argument is to assume that because relationships between self-governing groups *can* follow this pattern, they generally do, without specifying how and when intergroup norms arise. This assumption can lead to a theoretical dead end, with “law” becoming so broad that it encompasses almost any rule or custom. Twentieth-century state builders were wrong to assume that Liangshan was an inherently lawless frontier. But one of the goals of this book is to show how and when locally negotiated codes emerged, and when and why they broke down.

This book adopts an expansive approach to conflict, for two reasons: First, doing so avoids the influence of any particular perspective or genre that would construct the subject as, for example, “murder,” “rebellion,” “pacification,” or “ethnic conflict.” Second, comparison of different interpretations of violence can yield valuable insights in a context without sufficient data for statistical comparisons between different periods or events. By focusing attention on a contrast of different understandings of conflict and different constructions of who the principle actors are, we are forced to address the questions of, first, whether and how different frames relate to different material contexts; and second, what feedbacks might occur between different interpretations and the actual violence they describe.¹²

ON LIANGSHAN IN CHINESE HISTORY

Although the history of conflict in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China is often told through a focus on the big wars – the Panthay Rebellion in Yunnan, Yakub Beg’s conquest of Xinjiang, the Nian Rebellion in north China, and, above all, the catastrophic Taiping War – scholars have long acknowledged that these wars occurred simultaneously with and against a background of ongoing cycles of complex violence that also need to be explained.¹³ It is the “increasing inter-ethnic strife, poverty, and secret society activism” gripping many marginal regions in southern China that Philip Kuhn highlighted in his classic study of militarization in the nineteenth century. Kuhn suggested that the problems facing governors of such places were “among the most baffling challenges to bureaucracy that could be found anywhere in the empire.”¹⁴ How these conflicts were linked – whether the malaise that gripped many regions was structurally related, connected by common actors, mutually reinforcing, or occurred largely independently and due to local problems – is one of the important questions of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chinese history.

The idea that China suffered increasing disorder in this era has a long pedigree. In English, most studies highlight eighteenth-century population growth. With little space to extend agriculture, the story goes, standards of living sank and conflict over resources increased as more people crowded onto limited areas of land.¹⁵ Moreover, without a concomitant growth in the size of the state, the increase in the population overwhelmed the already lightweight Qing government’s ability to maintain control. These theses raise further questions. The argument that

conflict was caused by increased competition for resources ought to be examined more closely – and in more contexts – in light of Kenneth Pomranz’s work on the nineteenth-century economy, which suggests that living standards actually remained steady in the Yangtze delta and Middle Yangtze.¹⁶ Environmental crisis was a feature of “a few older peripheries like North China which had been unusually dependent on the state for managing their deepening ecological problems.”¹⁷ In the eighteenth century, the Qing state invested in transport infrastructure and mining in the Southwest, but not much in Liangshan; even if it had, the withdrawal of this sort of investment would not necessarily have led to the same sorts of crisis as the withdrawal of investment from northern China did. As Pomranz notes, standards of living might have increased in the nineteenth century in some hinterlands of the empire.¹⁸

The threat of land scarcity is also all but absent from accounts of conflict in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1946, one Chinese employee of the Xikang provincial regime guessed that Liangshan had room for another five to ten million settlers, but because “labour power is expensive and food is cheap, [land] is not worth cultivating.”¹⁹ Five to ten million was a guess. How many people the land could actually support depended on their livelihoods and diets, their knowledge of the land and agricultural technology, how equal or unequal land holding was, and to what extent people could trade other goods they produced for food from outside the region. But the writer was a graduate of an environmental science program, and he expressed the opposite view about other parts of Sichuan. Even if he was wildly wrong, suggestions that nineteenth-century conflict was impelled by Malthusian dynamics are not easily reconciled with his comment that “food is cheap, [land] is not worth cultivating” a century later. Although China’s population was a little higher in the early twentieth century than it had been at the turn of the nineteenth century, accounts of conflict in the Republican period rarely blame overpopulation. In the episode described by Leng Guangdian above, except insofar as the robbery referred to at the start of the passage might have been motivated by scarcity, shortages seem an unlikely motivation for the violence that ensued. Moreover, conflicts flared and eased over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Liangshan was a violent place most of the time, but some times were much more violent than others, and these escalations cannot be explained by demography. Finally, the thesis that a growing population overwhelmed the ability of a lightweight state to maintain control raises the question of why the Qing government didn’t

do more, earlier, to ensure that the size of the state at least kept up with population growth.

Conflict in southwest China resembles the violence analyzed by James Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, which frames conflict in the Southeast Asian highlands as a war between states and anarchist nonstate communities.²⁰ Scott's work does not explain exactly why state officials felt the need to expand their control, especially given that the returns were often lower than the cost of waging war. Perhaps they were only trying to accomplish the logical corollary of the historical narratives that highlight the nineteenth-century Qing state's lack of capacity: to increase the size of the state in line with population growth and thus prevent the latter from overwhelming the state's ability to maintain order. If so, Qing officials faced a grim choice between, on the one hand, the anarchy of decreasingly effective state control over an increasing population (which histories of nineteenth-century China suggest was a lot less benign than the anarchy that Scott refers to), and, on the other hand, waging aggressive wars to increase tax revenue. A bigger question raised in the application of Scott's theoretical work to violence in Liangshan is that in many accounts of the latter, the state seems peripheral. Local officials were present; a local military commander was responsible for the gruesome murder of Amu Yue-dan witnessed by Leng Guangdian. But that commander seems to have been acting on his own initiative, and much of the fighting described by Leng was carried out by militias, rather than state forces.

Most works on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conflict in China highlight the devolution of authority to provincial and local leaders. This trend is important, but historians must not equate devolution with decline. The notion that a fundamental aspect, or even cause, of China's problems at that time was its political decentralization accords with the twentieth-century Chinese nationalist stress on the need for strong centralized government. But we must not assume that devolved leadership handled the tasks of government worse than the central authorities.

The connections between theatres of violence in nineteenth-century China have been noted in studies of Xinjiang and the Northwest. Hodong Kim shows that revolts in Xinjiang were sparked by rumours of an impending massacre of Muslims that spread in the wake of reports of killings of Muslims by Han militias in Shaanxi, after the Taiping armies entered that province.²¹ Writing on conflict in the Southwest tends to see fewer connections with violence elsewhere. Han migration to the region and the rise of a mining industry in Yunnan are typically presented as

the major relevant links to events in other parts of China. Most scholars have explained the nineteenth-century conflicts as the escalation of local pressures and disputes resulting from this migration, which grew to the extent that one party either attacked the state or was attacked by the state, and thereby became “rebels.” This is the approach taken by Jodi Weinstein in her insightful study of the 1797 Nanlong Uprising in Guizhou, as well as most scholarship on the White Lotus War.²² David Atwill’s work presents the Panthay Rebellion in Yunnan in a similar light. Atwill reveals that the Taiping War was important, but only because it prevented the Qing court from concentrating more resources on suppressing rebels in Yunnan.²³ This book, however, argues that the Taiping War, interprovincial war in the early Republic, and the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 all had unexpected consequences that caused violence to escalate in Liangshan. A certain level of conflict on the fringes of Liangshan resulted from disputes over land tenure that developed with Han settlement, but much of the killing in the region over the period studied here was not an inevitable aspect of a “lawless” frontier society. Instead, I argue that local mechanisms to contain violence existed in Liangshan, but the region was repeatedly destabilized by events elsewhere.

The period covered by this book is 1800 to the 1950s. Since the end of the Cold War, scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese history has moved beyond “revolution” as its key problem. Instead, scholars emphasize broad continuities from the late Qing through the Republic of China and show how Communist rule built on what came before, despite the catastrophic experiment with totalitarian utopianism under Mao Zedong. To conceptualize these broad continuities, they invoke the notion of “modernity” – a thesis that a series of changes in the last two hundred years are broadly related to each other such that they constitute a distinct social form, one that varies from related modernities elsewhere but nonetheless shares such core features as industrialization, urbanization, nationalist politics, a demographic transition, mass education, and the incomplete emancipation of women. Growing alongside the new literature on Chinese modernity has been a parallel embrace of the notion of “early modernity” – broadly influenced by work on the European and Atlantic past – to characterize what otherwise might be called “late imperial China,” a period of somewhat uncertain temporality defined by demographic and commercial expansion, gradually increasing literacy, and the breakdown of certain older categories of inherited status. Liangshan is a case with something to say about both types of transition. This book shows that Liangshan’s indigenous people had their own “early

modernity,” participating in expanding trade networks that facilitated rapid demographic growth alongside the conflicts described in the book. As for what we may call (for want of a better term) “later modernity,” one of its most frequently noted components is the empire-to-nation transition, often said to be confused or haphazard in China’s case.²⁴ Although notions of sovereignty underwent considerable change, this book suggests that “empire-to-nation” has fairly limited explanatory value. Nationalism was historically imbricated within specific events and programs – such as the Guomindang war on drugs and the Second World War – which profoundly affected the way that nationalist thought affected communities in Liangshan.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book mixes chapters on particular periods with thematic chapters that explore the relationship of conflict to land disputes, opium, and captive-taking. Rather than progressing in a single chronological narrative, the three thematic chapters draw on evidence relating to each particular problem from different periods.

Chapter 1 considers conflict over land, a cause of violence throughout the period covered by this book. Such conflicts resulted more from the absence of a common understanding of how land could be owned, rented, and controlled, than from population pressure or raw shortage of land. Miscasting land-related conflict as the result of Malthusian pressures would create the impression that conflict in Liangshan was the inevitable result of demographic growth and migration, rather than the cultural-political question of land rights. The developmentalist ambitions of Chinese officials mattered too, though often not because of how they actually changed the landscape or how many migrants they brought to Nuosu lands. Late Qing developmental schemes brought real changes to a few places, but most Republican-era schemes were unsuccessful, in part because many were pursued during the Second World War, when a labour shortage in southwest China diminished the attractiveness of cultivating “wasteland” on Sichuan’s frontiers. Nevertheless, the developmentalist ethos meant that Qing and Republican Chinese officials usually sided with Han migrants when they came into conflict with Nuosu, which made a solution to conflict over land much less likely.

Chapter 2 analyzes the impact on Liangshan of nineteenth-century crises and transformations in the Qing political order. The devolution

of power to regional authorities during the Taiping War gave provincial officials an opportunity to pursue belligerent campaigns on a scale that a cautious central court had denied their predecessors. As historians have long understood, nineteenth-century China's civil wars were fought to a large extent by militias and paramilitary groups, rather than the older military forces. Liangshan was no exception, and the late nineteenth century saw the growth and formalization of something that resembled a Nuosu constabulary in Liangshan. Nuosu played an active role in this process, which amounted to rudimentary highland state building. Those involved did not fit James Scott's description of anarchist highlanders rejecting statelike forms of authority. Many nineteenth-century Qing sources, like much twentieth-century Western social science analysis, suggested that paramilitary groups were often a destabilizing force. There was indeed a lack of trust between the state and the paramilitaries whom it supported. But this book cautions against the view that violence came more naturally to organizations that were not subject to the proper disciplining powers of the state. The militias that populated Liangshan's late nineteenth-century martial landscape did not make the region less stable than it otherwise would have been.

As for opium, [Chapter 3](#) shows that Liangshan produced opium from the mid-nineteenth century, contrary to some assertions that it arrived only with the effective prohibition of opium in the Sichuan basin in the late 1900s. Opium and increasing Nuosu participation in paramilitary bands paid by the Qing state allowed the Nuosu to acquire firearms. But these trends should be seen not as unravelling the Qing political and social order, but as deepening the connections that constituted it. Opium also improved the Nuosu food supply, increasing the economic security of the poorest or at least offsetting the effects of population growth. Overall, it did comparatively little to fuel violence until the 1940s, when the central government began coordinating with local militias (including Han opium producers) to attack Nuosu growers.

[Chapter 4](#) returns to the theme of political order. Just as the Taiping War had destabilized Liangshan by empowering belligerent provincial officials, in the 1910s the region suffered the effects of crisis elsewhere in China. Conflict engulfed the Chinese state as a result of a clash between supporters and opponents of would-be monarch Yuan Shikai. This clash resulted in, first, an increase in military and militia activity in Liangshan, and subsequently, a reduction in the support and pay they received. This in turn led to a bloody spike in violence. Although the conflict was brought on by a crisis in the Chinese state, its reduction did not require

further intervention of state forces from outside the region. Nuosu clans, Han land cultivation societies, and a bicultural “warlord” were able to restore order, through force of arms, but also by creating new codes of law and treaties that drew on local custom.

Chapter 5 discusses the Nuosu practice of raiding Han communities for slaves, for which Nuosu became infamous. In fact, captive-taking was a habit of the Nuosu, the Qing state, and the Han. Taking captives was a mutually constituted product of the contact zone between all three groups, none of which was more responsible than another. Practices of captive-taking also powerfully shaped one local government measure for dealing with conflict – the attempt to require Nuosu dignitaries to take turns serving as hostages in purpose-built compounds near magistrates’ offices. This institution blended problematically with other patterns of captive-taking, blurring its meaning for Nuosu and probably playing a role in legitimizing Nuosu captive-taking. The embedding of Chinese captive-taking within judicial-administrative institutions also meant that Chinese observers had difficulty seeing their own practices as related to those of the Nuosu.

Finally, **Chapter 6** examines another period when Liangshan was destabilized by conflict elsewhere. The Second World War brought the Nationalist government to Sichuan, and the search for metal, coal, and land for refugee settlements brought them to Liangshan. Unhappily for the region, the Nationalist war on opium arrived in Liangshan at the same time as the Japanese war on the Nationalists dramatically reduced the capacity of the Chinese state. Foot soldiers in the war on drugs came to rely on the sale of poppies for their own survival. They made choices about which drug growers to cooperate with and which to attack that reflected their ethnic prejudices. This war, and other conflicts started by Nationalists who were increasingly entwined with local Han society and increasingly distant from the centre, sundered complex arrangements between local power holders, and plunged the region back into conflict.

PEOPLE AND LAND

Liangshan is southwest of the Sichuan basin, a part of the upland region known as the Southeast Asian Massif. Today, Liangshan is mostly encompassed by the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. To the east of the prefecture, the modern Maban and Ebian Yi Autonomous Counties share much with it, and to the south, the modern Heilongjiang and Liangshan



FIGURE 1 Map of Liangshan, showing the core area of Nuosu settlement and surrounds.

Note: The dotted line shows the main routes travelled by outsiders from the Sichuan basin through the main Han settlements in the Anning River valley to Yunnan.

Source: Drawn by Eric Leinberger based on information provided by the author.

roughly correspond to what was Ningyuan Prefecture in the Qing, and Ningshu (“Ning territory”) in the Republic. “Ning” is an old Chinese toponym for this region, and is likely related to “Ni,” an old Nuosu autonym that forms the basis of an old Nuosu term for their lands, “Nimu.”

The territory is bisected by the Anning River valley, which hosted Chinese garrisons in the Han and Tang empires, and has been dominated by Chinese-speaking settler communities and administration since the eighteenth century. East of the Anning River the Nuosu are the largest ethnic group. The Belgium-sized area (about thirty thousand square kilometres) from the Anning River in the west to the Sichuan basin in the northeast, and from the Dadu River in the north to Yunnan in the south and east, is called the “nuclear area” of Liangshan in Chinese and Western scholarship; pre-1949 foreign travellers often called it “Independent Lolo-land” after a widely used but pejorative name for the Nuosu.²⁵

As the foreign travellers’ term suggests, the people living here basically governed their own affairs until the Communist penetration of the region in the 1950s. Most of the conflict discussed in this book took place either on the fringes of this territory, or was the result of Qing and Chinese campaigns within it. West of the Anning River, the population is more diverse. Nuosu and Han began to settle this region in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, but neither group displaced the numerous other groups who lived there, including the Prmi and Na peoples.

The Nuosu are speakers of a Lolo-Burmese language, and hence the linguistic heirs (along with the Burmese, Naxi, and many smaller groups in Yunnan) of the group that many scholars suggest formed the elite of the multiethnic Nanzhao state based in what is now Yunnan in the eighth and ninth centuries.²⁶ When and how Lolo-Burmese speakers spread to Liangshan and became Nuosu is unclear. Linguist Scott Delancey suggests that the differentiation of Lolo-Burmese into its modern descendants probably “corresponded, at least chronologically, with the ascendancy and collapse of the Nanzhao state,” a theory that is commensurate with what Yi scholars in China argue.²⁷ This being the case, speakers of these languages must have come to Liangshan only a few centuries before; otherwise modern Nuosu would be expected to show more differentiation from other Lolo-Burmese languages.

In the nuclear area of Liangshan, Nuosu society was – and to a large extent still is – clan-based and centred on patrilineal lineages called *cyvi*.²⁸ Members of elite clans are often able to recite genealogies stretching back sixty generations, which puts the hypothesized Nuosu settlement of Liangshan within the scope of genealogy. Even people from nonelite clans “can spiel off ten to thirty generations.”²⁹ The other fundamental organizing principle of Nuosu society was caste, a feature that also continues to be significant. Every *cyvi* has a caste identity, principally *nzymo*, *nuoho*, or *quho*. Ideas of environmental pollution do appear to be part of the

Nuosu tradition, but are not associated with caste groups, and members of different ranks can become friends and visit each other's homes. What they do not do is intermarry. Caste identity has been maintained by a strict prohibition on cross-caste marriages that persists today, even among educated Nuosu.³⁰

Nzymo and *nuoho* are the elites. Lin Yueh-hua (Lin Yaohua, 1910–2000), a Harvard-trained anthropologist who spent time in Liangshan in the 1940s, estimated that they made up about 7 percent of the Nuosu population.³¹ Of this roughly 7 percent, most were *nuoho*. *Nzymo* were a tiny strata at the apex of Nuosu society, and are often, but often misleadingly, identified in Chinese sources as *tusi*, literally “native officer,” a somewhat imprecise term that referred to the highest-ranking titles within the “native officialdom” of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing eras – a strata of leadership in non-Han lands in the South and Southwest recognized and sometimes paid by the imperial state. In 1765, only four households in the wider Nuosu area held a *tusi* title from the imperial state, and one of them was often said to be a mixed Han-Nuosu lineage.³² The number of households with state stipends and lower-ranking titles increased through the Qing period in an ad hoc fashion, as the Qing state rewarded allies and coopted enemies. Such positions were bestowed mostly on the elite, though on *nuoho* as well as *nzymo*.

Nuoho and *nzymo* status is described with the metaphor of having “hard bones.” Chinese texts often refer to the *nzymo* and *nuoho* as the “Black Yi,” as *nuo* forms part of the word for “black.” There is debate about this: in modern Nuosu “black” is *anuo*; *nuo* on its own also means “watch” or “oversee,” so some Nuosu scholars contest the translation “Black Yi.”³³ *Anuo* also means “serious, paramount”; the most serious kinds of homicide were categorized as “*anuo*.”³⁴ Even though “Black Yi” is an ill-fitting and potentially misleading term for *nuoho*, the colour association seems unlikely to be coincidental, as the name of the main group of lower-caste Nuosu, *quho*, also uses one of the components of the term for “white” (*aqu*).³⁵

The *quho* (also called the *qunuo*) have “softer bones,” lower inherited status, and are often called the “White Yi” in Chinese. Lin estimated that they made up about half of the Nuosu population.³⁶ Despite coming from nonprestige backgrounds, *quho* individuals could still gain personal status by displaying qualities celebrated by Nuosu society more generally, such as bravery and martial prowess, or through reputations as wise strategists or judges.³⁷ Other categories of people, thought of as “somehow outside the system,” had no bones and could be owned by other clans:

the *mgajie*, semi-independent farmers, and the *gaxy*, recently captured slaves.³⁸ Individuals of unfree status could marry other individuals of the same rank, and their descendants would, eventually, assimilate into Nuosu society as *quho* over an unspecified number of generations. Some sources equate the “White Yi” with the slaves. Insofar as the *quho* were the group to which most Chinese writers refer when they use the term “White Yi,” this is incorrect; at most, *quho*/White Yi were sometimes the descendants of slaves.

Much has been made of the Nuosu system of slavery by twentieth-century Chinese ethnography, which interpreted Nuosu society as a living relic of the slave mode of production in the Marxist understanding of history. Stevan Harrell and Ann Maxwell Hill have criticized this view of the Nuosu, in that slaves were incidental rather than fundamental to the Nuosu economy. As Hill puts it, the Nuosu were a “society with slaves” rather than a “slave society.”³⁹ Nonetheless, a couple of correctives need to be added, the most important of which is that taking captives was part of the common culture of warfare in Liangshan, practiced by Han and Nuosu, and the Qing and Republican states alike; the actions of each side legitimized and reinforced those of the other.

The name “Nuosu” transliterated into Chinese makes very occasional appearances in Chinese writing (from the Qing to the present), but more usually the Nuosu people have been subsumed under much larger categories of identity in Chinese discourse. Before 1949, the primary category was “Yi” (夷). At the most basic level, in the Qing dynasty, Yi just indicated the non-Han peoples of the southern reaches of the empire, its usage somewhat comparable to the Euro-American use of “Indian” for the indigenes of the New World. Particular cultural groups had standard Chinese names, like the Miao, but many groups were just called Yi. Westerners were Yi too, until the British demanded a rectification of their name in the Treaty of Tianjin. The British unease was related to a sense that the term was derogatory, and it has often been translated as “barbarian.” Recent scholars have argued against an equation of the terms “Yi” and “barbarian” because the terms have their own distinct histories and connotations, and also because they see “Yi” as less negative than “barbarian.”⁴⁰ Some now use the translation “foreigner” as a more neutral alternative, but “foreigner” also has different connotations from “Yi.” “Yi” meant that a person so called was culturally alien, but did not necessarily suggest that they came from a “foreign” state. The Qing certainly saw Liangshan as part of their empire. Yi 夷 has gradually disappeared from Chinese, as a result of doubts about its politeness and because the classification

of China's cultural groups as *minzu* (national or ethnic groups) required that they have more specific names. The Nuosu remained Yi, but in the 1950s the character was replaced with the homophone (彝). Even this category, however, is a broader category than Nuosu, and also includes other numerically smaller groups of speakers of related Tibeto-Burmese languages such as the Nasu, Axi, Azhe, Sani, Nisu, Shesu, Sami, Lipo, and Lolopo.⁴¹ The problem for historians is that it is sometimes impossible to be sure how someone identified as Yi would have identified themselves. This book adopts the following conventions: In direct quotations, I have retained "Yi." I reserve "Nuosu" for the people in the area of Liangshan in which most people are Nuosu, the area east of the Anning River identified above. For some other regions on the fringes of Liangshan, or west of the Anning River, I have thought it better to use "Yi" even outside direct quotation, as it is much less certain that the people in those places were Nuosu.

Many of the Han residents of Liangshan are the descendants of people who migrated there from central China and the Sichuan basin in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They settled in the Anning River valley or in the eastern fringes of Liangshan in the counties of Mabian, Pingshan, Ebian, and Leibo. Most were farmers who grew grain, kept livestock, and supplemented their income with trade in forest and upland products they acquired from the Nuosu. The latter provided a wax-producing insect, animal products, opium (from around the 1830s), and the Han provided cloth, salt, and iron tools. The region's economy became more commercialized and more integrated with wider trade networks at the end of the nineteenth century, but around 1800 it was neither of these things to any great extent. Edward Baber (1843–90), a member of the British diplomatic staff in China, travelled in the Anning River valley and noted that "rice and maize are so abundant and so little exported that no one is enriched and no one starves."⁴² Not much about the regional variant of Chinese culture and society impressed literate Chinese travellers, who tended to look down on Han migrant communities in China's frontiers, here and elsewhere. Gazetteers of Liangshan were dismissive of the region's artisanal output:

The people of Yuexi do not appreciate excessively ornamental work, and they cannot make it either. Their implements and crafts are old fashioned and simple; much poorer than the fine and varied products of other locations. There are no artisans of great skill, and even if there were, nobody would buy their work; people are satisfied with the simple and the unsophisticated.⁴³

The identities described above – Nuosu and Han – were associated with real differences in language and culture, but such categories have masked the existence of significant numbers of people whose everyday life was shaped by both cultures, and who might claim more than one identity or be excluded by purists from both groups. *Hnewo teyy* (pronounced “hnewo tezh”; roughly, “The Book of Origins”), one of a number of Nuosu epic poems found throughout the Yi cultural area, says:

There at Hsido Valley [Xide],
 The Shuo [Han] people come to know the Ni [Nuosu] tongue,
 And speak it just like the Ni.
 And the Ni people come to know the Shuo tongue,
 And speak it just like the Shuo.⁴⁴

And:

There at Leggeorro [pronounced “lege’odzho”; Xichang],
 The sun scorches your back on a clear day,
 And boils blister on your belly,
 Water buffalo and cattle plough together.⁴⁵
 Ploughing, they come down the same path;
 Released, they go up their separate ways.
 And Ni and Shuo mix together.
 Leaving their houses, they come down the same path,
 Returning home, they go up their separate ways,
 The Shuo men wear the *nzuti* [Yi headdress] on their heads,
 And the Shuo women wear trousers.⁴⁶

The verses say similar things about Mutedoli, also in the Anning River valley.⁴⁷ These lines are not readily connectable with any particular time period. According to Wu Jingzhong, the first written versions of *Hnewo teyy* were likely made in the Ming period, though the epics themselves are much older. After it was written down *Hnewo teyy*, like other Nuosu epics, continued to be performed orally by *bimo* on various ceremonial occasions, in which the written text often does not play a significant part.⁴⁸ How exactly writing affected the content or performance of epics is unclear, but it seems highly unlikely to have “fixed” the words. Versions of the *Hnewo teyy* refer to potatoes and tobacco, both of which spread to Liangshan only in the Qing period.⁴⁹ Although the tradition of the epics is very old, they changed as they were transmitted in ways that reflected

the changing circumstances of the Nuosu homeland. In the context in which these lines were created, the population of the Anning River valley was clearly undergoing a process of creolization.

Other sources also attest to cultural hybridity. The victim in an 1873 murder case from Mianning was a man called Li Heigutou (Blackbone), killed in a fight with a man to whom he apparently owed a debt.⁵⁰ “Heigutou” was what some nineteenth-century Chinese sources called *nuoho*, though nobody recorded whether he was a *nuoho* who had for some reason come to live among the Han and taken a Han surname, or whether he was a Han, mixed, or *qubo* man who was for some reason associated with the “black bones.” He shows, however, the possibility for identity to be ambiguous. Among individuals born in mid-twentieth-century Zhaojue featured in recent ethnographic work by Anke Hein and Deyun Zhao, are a Han man with a Nuosu wife and a family genealogy (burnt in the Cultural Revolution) that had been written in Chinese and Nuosu; as well as a Nuosu adoptee by a Han family and a Han who married a Nuosu slave.⁵¹ As this fieldwork illustrates, and as is suggested by *Hnewo teyy*, cultural practices in such families blend Han and Nuosu traditions. Indeed, the robbery mentioned in Leng Guangdian’s memoir (recounted at the beginning of this introduction) was allegedly committed by a *bimo* who had been invited to a Han home to perform rituals.

Sources of Liangshan’s history often frame cultural hybridity in particular ways, or downplay it. Texts written by Qing officials usually portray Nuosu acculturation to Han society as a taming process that made “wild” or “raw” (i.e., independent) Yi into “cooked” (i.e., subject) Yi, while Han who acculturated to Nuosu communities were liable to be seen as deviants or traitors (*Han jian*). Foreign travellers sometimes recycled the same biases into their writing: a British officer described political alliances between lower-class Han and the Nuosu as a matter of the Nuosu being “in touch with the scum of the Chinese, who act as spies.”⁵² Some sources show that elite Nuosu similarly dismissed or disparaged examples of Han influence. A verse in the *Hnewo Teyy* says that in Leibo, a mixed town in the east, the liquor pipes – important within Nuosu ritual – are *zho* (“sullied,” “impure”).⁵³ Such attitudes may have hardened in the twentieth century. Leng Guangdian’s family had used Chinese names for generations, and his brothers all had the character “Guang” in their names, but in the 1930s Guangdian told a foreign traveller that he only “chose such a name in jest to show that he was not Chinese.”⁵⁴

In a 2007 Chinese television documentary about the construction of the railway between Chengdu and Kunming in the 1970s, Chinese

engineers who worked on the project claimed that Liangshan's indigenous people would ask questions such as "Is this place here bigger or is China bigger?" These comments reflect Chinese travel-writing and proverbs' usual attribution of naivety and ignorance of the outside world to peoples of the Southwest.⁵⁵ Throughout the period studied in this book, Chinese and foreign travellers made similar claims. But Nuosu classic literature reveals that the Nuosu had a rough sense of a common identity that went beyond village, caste, and clan, and a knowledge of the world beyond the Nuosu lands since well before the time studied here. Such texts differentiated Nuosu, identified variously as Nuosu and Ni (a more literary and possibly somewhat broader term), from the Ozzu (pronounced "Odzu," which referred to Prmi, or sometimes Tibetans) and from the Shuo or Hxiemga (pronounced "Hiemga," meaning the Han).⁵⁶ These texts show that the Nuosu understood that the Han were much more numerous than themselves, an understanding that indicates their connections with a wider world. Nuosu literary terms for "north wind" (*shuo hly*, "Han wind"), as opposed to "south wind" (*ni hly*, "Ni wind"), also suggest geographic knowledge of where the lands of Han were in relation to their own.⁵⁷

ENVIRONMENT AND POLITICAL ORDER

In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, James Scott develops a geographical explanation for the fact that state authority rarely extended far in the highland zones in Southeast Asia before the twentieth century. Before the deployment of twentieth-century transport and communications technologies such as air forces, trucks, all-weather roads, and satellite communications, mountainous terrain made the projection of state power very difficult.⁵⁸ Liangshan supports his argument well enough. An environmental explanation for the difficulties of conquering the upland territory southwest of the China-based empires found abundant expression in Chinese writing about the region, including the Ming novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San guo yan yi*), a text widely read among sinophone military leaders in the Qing dynasty and the twentieth century and referred to in their discussion of Liangshan.⁵⁹ In the novel, Lü Kai, a general accompanying the fabelled military strategist Zhuge Liang, explains the problems with conquering the southern Man, a non-Chinese people who live in a mountainous southern country. (The Man are not identifiable with any people who existed in the nineteenth century, but they have often

been associated with the Nuosu, just as their country is associated with various places, including Liangshan).

“Long ago,” Lü Kai explained, “I heard of a Black Lance kingdom among the southern Man, one bereft of human morality. Their rattan armour is almost impossible to pierce. Then there is the water poisoned by peach leaves: the natives are inured to it, but outsiders will die drinking it. That’s what the southern region is like; the most complete victory would be of little use. It would be best to bring the army home.”⁶⁰

After obtaining an oath of personal loyalty from the previously stubborn chief of the Man people, Zhuge Liang departs their territory, rejecting his councillor’s advice to construct a Chinese-style administration and station garrisons in the region. Feeding the troops would be too difficult, he reasons. The defeated Man, who Zhuge Liang acknowledges had “suffered grievously,” would resent them.⁶¹

Nor are tales of poisonous plants found only in the Chinese literature. The Nuosu tradition has similar warnings about places rendered unfit for human habitation by their botany. As *Hnewo teyy* says,

There, at Njiyishuonuo,
The grasses are poisonous.
When the Ni touch them, they are poisoned,
When the Shuo touch them, they are poisoned
One day, poison will send them all to death.⁶²

Nineteenth-century gazetteers and military commanders’ reports, and twentieth-century travellers’ memoirs, also indicated the Nuosu used poisons to hunt and create traps in the landscape.⁶³ It is unclear whether Nuosu and Chinese environmental knowledge consisted of two discreet worlds, or an overlapping multicultural epistemic sphere woven out of popular knowledge and travelling stories of poison grass and peach water.

Early nineteenth-century Chinese commanders also described – in language often reminiscent of and perhaps inspired by *Three Kingdoms* – the difficulties posed by Liangshan’s mountainous terrain, thick forests, and poor roads. To the east, Liangshan is separated from the Sichuan basin by the steep, thickly forested peaks of the Xiangling Mountains (one of which is the famous Mount Emei). In 1838, Oshan (E-shan, 1770?–1838), the governor general of Sichuan, wrote about the “extremely perilous” roads along steep cliff sides, which Nuosu could block with rocks to cut

access.⁶⁴ Elsewhere he reported, “In the Yi territory there are deep, dense forests, thick with bamboo, and many forks in the mountain roads. When we pursue [the Yi], they disappear without a trace.”⁶⁵ Liu Zhengchang, one of Ošan’s contemporaries, wrote that “government soldiers cannot stay long in the depths of the old-growth forests, or among the dangerous peaks.”⁶⁶ Only one route was well travelled by outsiders to Liangshan from the Sichuan basin through the Xiangling Mountains to the Anning River valley. It wound through the steep slopes and valleys to the north of the Dadu River, crossed that river at Fulin, near Hanyuan, then proceeded south through Nuosu and mixed country to the Anning River. The peaks on the southern side of the Dadu River in Liangshan were still forested through the nineteenth century. Along the Anning River, there was more deforestation, and around Xichang, Qing forces took to denuding hillsides in order to deprive Nuosu fighters of cover.⁶⁷

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century generals understood Zhuge Liang’s concern about the difficulties of feeding an occupying army, too. Cooler, high-altitude environments produce less food for passing armies to buy or plunder than lowland territory. Only the lowest valleys in Liangshan yield more than one crop per year. The Anning floodplain is suitable for rice cultivation, but the higher elevations east and west of the valley allow only crops that either produce less food per hectare (like buckwheat or barley), or are more easily hidden from state tax collectors and military procurers (like potatoes).⁶⁸ In the age before gasoline engines, delivery of food and munitions to military forces across mountainous terrain with no navigable rivers was very slow and expensive. Commanders likened the logistical difficulties of fighting in Liangshan to those of the eighteenth-century Jinchuan Wars in western Sichuan, which, thanks to transport costs, were the most expensive wars fought by the Qing before the nineteenth century.⁶⁹

The natural environment and poor infrastructure limited the enemies of the state too. A force of Taiping rebels made its last stand in the north of Liangshan. The army was destroyed not only thanks to the Qing commanders and the local paramilitaries they raised, but by a combination of the region’s terrain and limited infrastructure.⁷⁰ And there is evidence that geography also constrained the Nuosu. Ošan wrote that “they are unfamiliar with the routes to the Chinese heartland, and depend upon deviant Han or the subject (*shu*) Yi of the borderlands to guide them out of their lairs.”⁷¹ A Nuosu fable about a man famed for his strength describes him being forced to carry his horse on his own back along particularly difficult sections of road.⁷² Although the Nuosu were accused

of many things, Chinese commanders rarely alleged that they destroyed roads and bridges, which suggests that the Nuosu welcomed improved mobility as much as Chinese commanders did. Furthermore, while Chinese commanders had trouble feeding campaigning armies, the Nuosu, who were not embedded in a commercial network that could supply food, also had trouble finding alternative sources of food if they needed to. Ošan turned this to military advantage:

Your slave has heard that the Yi lands are barren, and they usually store little grain. In the eighth and ninth months, when their grain was ripening, soldiers were sent to gather it all up, and hide it in the forests. Within two or three months [the Yi] were hungry, and by winter, when snows sealed off the mountains, the freezing and starving Yi were forced to come out and beg for their lives. The most dangerous Yi were executed, and the rest allowed to live.⁷³

Qing commanders adopted similar tactics again in the 1860s, and mentioned the same possibility in the 1900s.

HISTORIES OF LIANGSHAN

Genealogy and epic poetry were the two most important Nuosu ways of understanding the past before the late twentieth century.⁷⁴ Much work remains to be done on the voluminous and, to outsiders, little-known and difficult body of pre-twentieth-century Nuosu texts, but the growing field of Nuosu scholarship on them indicates that when Liangshan's indigenous inhabitants wrote about the past, they related genealogies, the deeds of semi-mythic heroes and villains, and accounts of the origins of animals, clans, material things, and customs.⁷⁵ This rich body of literature was little concerned with detailed chronicling of specific events and lives during the times of those who experienced them. It was, nonetheless, a living tradition that changed as the Nuosu homeland changed. Apart from reported speech in legal cases, the records of travellers, and petitions and reports of *tusi*, these epic poems and genealogies are the only Nuosu voice from before the twentieth century – the only voice that comes from an exclusively Nuosu context. For this reason, despite the impossibility of dating and locating the words and their authors, this book draws on them to add texture and Nuosu-ness to what would otherwise be a less diverse, and more Chinese, pre-twentieth-century canvas.

In the twentieth century, Nuosu with Chinese education began to write new accounts of the past. Prominent among them in the Republican period were Leng Guangdian, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, and Qomo Zayo (Chinese: Qumu Zangyao), both of whom wrote brief histories of the Nuosu that included similar sorts of information as traditional local gazetteers: outlines of *longue durée* history derived largely from Chinese-language texts and structured around dynastic periods, with added local knowledge from Nuosu oral traditions; clarification of names of different groups; population estimates; and introductions to customs.⁷⁶ Nuosu writing on recent history has consisted almost exclusively of accounts of personal experience. Narratives about the Republican period are typically stories of bloody chaos. These jibe with the older orthodox Communist understanding of the early twentieth century but also restate the problem that the Communist promise of fair treatment for ethnic minorities was supposed to resolve – a promise now neglected, and often glossed over in newer popular histories that suggest a deeper process of nonviolent integration and assimilation.⁷⁷

As is usual with bodies of documentary evidence on conflict, many sources on the history of violence in Liangshan are unreliable and contradictory. As Philip Kuhn points out, reports from the Qing commanders in nineteenth-century frontiers and hinterlands were “filled with inflated rebel casualty reports” and usually understated Qing losses, a point also made by Yudru Tsomu.⁷⁸ “It was common practice,” Mao Haijian writes in his history of the Opium War, “for officials to make up lies and gloss over problems” in their reports to the throne.⁷⁹ Commanders were punished for losing, but facts – particularly in remote places – were difficult to check.

Nor was hindsight a guarantor of detachment. After the Nationalist retreat to Chongqing in the Second World War, the party sponsored a survey of Sichuan and Xikang to investigate the economic, political, and social conditions of the two territories. A team led by celebrated educator and politician Huang Yanpei (1878–1965) visited Liangshan and its fringes. In their summary of the region’s history, they declared:

In the high Qing, if robberies occurred in any place, the government would order the local *tusi* to have the culprits caught and sent for punishment. The cases were typically resolved in a timely manner. At that time, the Green Standard soldiers, who wore yellow uniforms and golden fish insignia (*jin yu se hao gua*), could even go alone deep into the Yi lairs to deliver messages. The Yi always treated them with the greatest respect. There were

never any instances of messengers being ill treated or slighted. This was an age of peace between the Han and Yi.⁸⁰

The team hedged its description with the vague phrase “high Qing” (*Qing sheng shi*). This term was underpinned by a cyclical rise-peak-decline model of dynastic history, a frame that elided the possibility that state power could simultaneously strengthen in some respects and geographical areas and weaken in others. There were major conflicts in Liangshan in the eighteenth century: the Yongzheng emperor’s general Ortai (Chinese: E-er-tai) unleashed a fierce campaign against non-Chinese chieftains in Guizhou, Sichuan, and northeast Yunnan in the 1720s. The rest of the eighteenth century was more peaceful, but the notion of Green Standard soldiers moving easily throughout Liangshan, treated with the “greatest respect,” paints an image of far more Qing influence than there really was.

Other Republican-era sources stretched the notion of an age of Qing peace even further, declaring that the whole period of Qing rule had been one of strong frontier governance.⁸¹ In the 1930s, the journal *Sichuan Frontier Quarterly* complained, “In the Qing era, the government paid great attention to border defence and encouraged people to migrate to the frontier, giving them every kind of aid and support possible. The Yi were afraid of the Han government’s authority, and dared not disturb the Han settlers.”⁸² But the Yi certainly did dare disturb the Han settlers, as they had, in turn, been thoroughly disturbed by the settlers and the Qing state. Republican-era writers might not have known much about the Qing, though if they had read the gazetteers they would have known that some of their more extreme claims of Qing stability were false. What they presented was a state-focused interpretation of the dynamics of violence, understanding peace as the result of governments that paid “great attention to border defence,” blaming violence on “the politicians of our era who ignore the frontier,” about whom the “one cannot help but sigh and curse.”⁸³ The thesis that incidence of intergroup conflict was in some way inversely related to state power could be tested empirically, but these writers’ articulation of it also reflected their efforts to lobby their governors to take more aggressive action in the region.

New histories were written in the 1950s, which saw an unprecedented effort by outsiders to the region to systematically survey the land and its people, a project that also involved the compilation of oral histories and Nuosu texts. This work had a political component. In 1956, the government began what it called the “Democratic Reforms,” a series of measures centred on spreading land reform, communalization policies,

and Chinese education to the non-Han territories of the Southwest. In the face of stiff resistance, the official justification for the program was the liberation of Nuosu slaves. Histories produced in the 1950s through 1970s therefore emphasized Nuosu slave owning and sought evidence in oral testimony of previous “slave revolts” against the elite. The researchers themselves, of course, did not necessarily have the same ideological or political commitments as the Communist cadres, a point well made by Thomas Mullaney in reference to the Ethnic Classification Project.⁸⁴

The political biases in the sources from the 1950s will be familiar to most readers, and those in the Republican-period sources are not difficult to grasp, but in cases where political or personal interest is less obvious it is usually more difficult to separate interpretive lenses from the social world they describe. As soon as one looks beyond the motivations actors themselves give for their own behaviour, and searches for ways in which actions were shaped by an aspect of the environment, one enters a black box of causation, in which proof – or disproof – of observers’ and participants’ interpretations of conflict becomes very difficult. The value of a *longue durée* approach is that it illuminates moments where there are clear ruptures in interpretative patterns, and makes it possible to determine whether there was a corresponding rupture in demographic, economic, or institutional arrangements. If not, the interpretation in question must be related to a change in the way that people understand their world; perhaps the dissipation of old conceptions and biases, or the rise of new ones.