Frontier Fieldwork
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Introduction

During the early twentieth century, the world was transformed as old empires crumbled and new nation-states took their place. In China, the shattered pieces of the Qing empire posed a series of dilemmas to those seeking to build a new nation out of its ruins. The 1911 Xinhai Revolution, which brought down the Qing Dynasty, had introduced a new language of Han Chinese ethnonationalism that promised to banish all vestiges of Manchu rule. But as Tibet and Mongolia began to reconsider their ties with the nascent Republic of China, the euphoria of this newfound nationalism soon dissipated. The hoisting of the new flag of the republic, which officially embraced the “union of five races” (wuzu gonghe), came across to many as a futile attempt to “rescue the Empire” in the early twentieth century. For those ruling China, holding on to its former imperial borders had indeed become a major source of anxiety, especially in light of Western and Japanese imperialism. Powerless Chinese diplomats faced further humiliation at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 after failing to secure the return of the Shandong Peninsula. Opportunistic Japanese forces had seized the German concessions in 1914 and, with the complicity of other powers, refused to hand them over to China. Despite the return of these territories in 1922, the danger of a wider territorial dismemberment on all China’s borders appeared imminent.

Responding to this growing threat, a new generation of scholars took it upon themselves to find urgent solutions. The challenge was to re integrate those outlying pieces, the frontier territories, into the new nation-state puzzle that now lay before them. In their eyes, the frontier question
(bianjiang wenti), which would haunt Chinese politics for most of the early twentieth century, could be met only by engaging with the frontier and its inhabitants directly. It was time for scholars and enthusiasts to leap from their armchairs and take to the field.

This book is about those who took to the field on China's frontiers. Starting in the 1920s, this group of people came from very different backgrounds: they were students, photographers, travellers, social scientists, agriculturalists, and missionaries. They pursued different agendas but converged as one in issuing a rallying call to place China's margins at the centre of the nation's race to modernity. Their work in the field raised critical questions about the very meaning of “China” at a time when border areas and their inhabitants were far removed from the minds of the vast majority of China's population. Whereas governments in other nations extended their authority using railways or military power, policy makers in China over time would recognize the limitations of central power and claim that the key to nation building on the frontier lay in being in the field. By proposing a new approach to the understanding and transformation of China's frontiers, proponents of fieldwork redefined the meaning of the nation. Those working in the field saw themselves as a vanguard force, building a new relationship for China's disparate multi-ethnic population through a scientific approach grounded in both method and empathy vis-à-vis its object of study. Choosing to deploy scholars rather than soldiers, they saw China's frontier as a different sort of battlefield, foreshadowing the policies of social development and intervention that would be pursued decades later, during the Cold War.

The question of how to transform these remote areas and secure the survival of the Chinese nation produced a battle of ideas in which frontier and nation were intertwined. Newly established ideas of sovereignty and territoriality stemming from colonial expansion and mapping techniques from around the world made their way into local intellectual debates and government policies. Those in the field took these debates further, calling for a form of modernity that would take the human and geographical particularities of China's frontier as foundations for the political and economic life of the new nation. Fieldwork in China's border areas was thus an integral part of this vision of modernity, transforming the region from an adventurous playground into an experimental social laboratory. In turn, ideas of citizenship and development that had begun to shape China's cities and countryside alike were also directed toward the frontier areas. The mobilization of fieldworkers on China's frontiers reached its peak during the Second World War and lay the groundwork for the mass science
movements that became the norm during the early People’s Republic of China (PRC) period. Building revolution and the nation in the field would remain an important part of the political landscape for most of China’s twentieth century.

Fieldwork on China’s frontier was shaped by practices derived from social surveys and anthropological fieldwork developed in Western social sciences. Yet during this period the terms “fieldwork” (tianye gongzuo) and “survey” (diaocha) in China went beyond the jealously guarded realms of the social sciences and were deployed by a wide range of people and professions. Despite the influence of science (kexue) as an undisputed banner of modernity in China during this period, methodological innovations in the field went well beyond its scientific remit. Over time, many of these practices were reimagined and rearticulated to meet the specific demands of China’s nation-building project. Fieldworkers became “frontier workers,” while the objects of their study and intervention were cast as “border people” (bianmin), both terms revealing the intimate links between research, intervention, and the unravelling of the Chinese geobody. Chinese scholars argued for the creation of a new discipline of “frontier administration studies,” a discipline they considered unique to China even while it incorporated the experience of British and American mandates and Soviet minority policies. As those in the field reached out to their non-Han Chinese counterparts, seeking to foster the growth of new citizens on China’s frontier, fieldwork itself became an act of civic duty.

**Recentring Modern China’s Frontier**

Fieldworkers and their experiences on the frontier challenge many of our assumptions about nation building in China. Many scholars have tied ideas of race and anti-colonial struggle, instrumental in creating and mobilizing new forms of Chinese identity, to an understanding of the nation mediated by experiences of modernity in cities. While Peter Zarrow focuses on the new forms of citizenship and sociability emphasized in textbooks and Eugenia Lean emphasizes public emotions, both ultimately imagine China through an urban lens. Scholars who shift away from this urban focus have noted the importance of rural China to visions of the nation: Margherita Zanasi, for example, examines a vision of modernity that sought to reorient China’s economy away from the treaty ports by integrating the rural world into a unified industrialized nation. More recently, Kate Merkel-Hess has argued that the ideas of social reformers venturing
into China’s countryside contributed to a distinct form of rural modernity. It requires another leap of understanding to move beyond cities and villages to see the frontier in its own right as a cornerstone of Chinese modernity. But it is important to recognize, as did scholars at the time, that the frontier was a key piece in China’s nation-building puzzle, closely interconnected with other modernities in urban and rural settings.

A second group of scholars takes a different tack, critically examining the degree of influence of the centre over China’s border areas. Victor Zatsepine’s study of the Amur River frontier between Russia and China focuses on the local dynamics between indigenous groups and settlers and the hybrid society that emerged. On the other hand, Joseph Lawson’s study of the Liangshan mountainous region in China’s southwest presents us with a complex picture of frontier violence, with the state as a constant disrupting factor in a precarious order upheld by Han settlers and Nuosu communities.

This book owes much to such studies, but by no means seeks to remove China’s political centre from the picture. Although fieldworkers were characterized by their long stays in the region, they were not settlers but intermediaries. As they moved between the frontier and the centre, both their work in the field and their visions of the nation they sought to build were shaped and mediated by their experience in both worlds.

Scholars who have examined nation building on China’s frontier tend to approach it from both a state and a party perspective, emphasizing the ideological exchanges between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Guomindang (GMD). James Leibold focuses on the discursive strategies produced by Chinese intellectuals and party officials striving to incorporate borderland territories into a new Chinese geobody. Xiaoyuan Liu, Hsiao-ting Lin, and Justin Jacobs also deal with official CCP and GMD policies and shed light on the similarities between both parties in their respective frontier policies. This book seeks to question the monolithic nature of the state-sponsored project by underlining the complexities and identities of those actors working in the field, such as Christian missionaries, social scientists, and students. While some of these worked hand in hand with the state, others directly challenged official policies, seeking to further their own imaginings of the nation. Their ambiguous position was a direct consequence of a weak political centre that felt obliged to devolve power to those in the field, with little control over how (or for whom) it was exerted.

Fieldwork in China, and specifically in its borderlands, has also become the focus of a number of works in recent years. Many of these works have
examined the tensions between Western scholars and their Chinese collaborators that were played out in the field. Others have persuasively shown how particular disciplines entering China during the Republican period led to the creation of new ideas of the nation and the emergence of an indigenized science. Yet no single discipline can encompass the complexities that China’s frontier posed to those who ventured into the field. This book seeks to tell another story: one that examines how scholars built their own understanding of the frontier by creating new bodies of knowledge and field methods mediated by their own beliefs in scientism, religion, and (inter)nationalism.

It is also important to consider scholarship in the PRC that is designated as a distinct field under the name of “frontier studies” (bianjiangxue). Bianjiangxue is characterized by its nationalist approach and strict adherence to a teleological process describing the formation of the country’s present multi-ethnic nation-state. Emma Teng has even argued that it serves “as a pre-emptive defence against both internal and external pressures for decolonization of the former Qing territories by promoting the ideology of ‘national unification’ at home and abroad.” Despite their nationalist overtone, recent works focusing on frontier history have provided important contributions to our understanding of the Republican period (1912–49). Wen Chunlai’s ethnographic account of non-Han indigenism in China’s southwest provinces during this period provides new voices to a story that is usually dominated by the Han. On the other hand, Wang Hongliang’s work on the emergence of “frontier administration studies” enables us to understand how particular bodies of frontier knowledge and politics interacted as a result of the Manchurian crisis of 1931. Both works account for the particularities of the period this book focuses on, characterized by a sense of impending crisis and massive transformations.

China’s Frontier Question: 1919–45

The period between 1919 and 1945 was critical to the shaping of China’s frontiers. This is not to deny the impact of earlier global forces; during the late nineteenth century, “nationalism and imperialist commercial interests” certainly left an enduring mark on policies and identities in China’s border regions. Yet the intensity of change in the early twentieth century was remarkable. In the space of a mere quarter of a century, China faced an unprecedented number of crises that prompted its citizens to seek a radical reunderstanding of its frontier areas. Conflicts and war during this
period enabled a series of “frontier passages” for each of the actors studied in this book, setting them on the path to a concrete, unique encounter with China’s border regions.15

The starting point of this story lies, inevitably, in the aftermath of 1919 and the intellectual outburst of the May Fourth Movement. Smarting at the humiliation of Chinese diplomats at the Paris Peace Conference, and by the failure of the United States to defend Wilsonian principles or China’s right to self-determination, student protesters denounced the Allied betrayal of China and the spinelessness of the Chinese government. A wave of protest movements across Asia sought to redress the injustices and asymmetries of a Eurocentric world system by proposing radical alternatives that envisaged a new regional order.16 The May Fourth Movement “helped inform the emergent post-First World War global environment of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist political and cultural revolutions.”17

Inside China, it prompted deeper questions about national identity and culture that would shape the language and methods of political action for decades.18

China’s frontier question was intimately bound up with the injustices denounced so vehemently at home and on the international stage. The ongoing sense of crisis was intensified by the Japanese annexation of Manchuria in 1931. Facing imperial aggression at its borders, China instituted a number of campaigns that sought to both mobilize and educate society about the dangers posed by the weakening of its frontiers.19 But those who turned their attention to the frontier had many different motivations. Young students keen to address injustice and inequality tackled the geographical and cultural chasms between the modern city and its peripheries by venturing into the field and engaging with the “masses” inhabiting these regions. During the 1920s and ’30s, “Going to the people” would in effect become a popular slogan that shaped new practices in the field and the emergence of folklore and community studies.20 As David Faure reminds us, the young students who ventured into villages were “never only on a fact finding mission.”21

The Nationalist Revolution (1925–27) proved to be a pivotal moment in China’s search for national unification, although it was also a harbinger of the civil wars to come. As in 1919, anti-imperialist sentiment was critical, and would play a fundamental role in defining the position of the GMD vis-à-vis the world, as well as its relationship with non-Han communities in its outlying territories. Not only was the old five-colour flag scrapped and replaced with one highlighting the pivotal role of the GMD in bringing about national unification but the GMD’s new attitude was
also enshrined in the term it used to describe oppressed nations under the yoke of imperialism: *ruoxiao minzu* (small and weak races). The term helped define the party-state’s role in advocating the liberation and support of its own minorities under the threat of foreign powers. Also significant was the ideological legacy of Sun Yat-sen. Although derided by critics for his lack of consistency, his Three Principles of the People (nationalism, democracy, people’s livelihood) and support for “racial equality” (*minzu pingdeng*) would become enshrined as a GMD canon, yet remained open to wide interpretation of both their meaning and implementation. In both cases noted above, the term *minzu* would be a central focus of this discourse that attempted to draw common ties between the Han and the non-Han peoples. Although the GMD would for the most part adhere to a biological understanding of the term as “race,” over time Chinese scholars would debate its significance and composition on the grounds of culture and self-identity.

Sun’s vision for China’s territorial frontiers and its inhabitants was laid out more clearly in his *Outline for National Reconstruction* (*Jianguo dagang*) in 1924, which called for a paternalistic intervention by the state to foster welfare and development in these regions. “Reconstruction” (*jianshe*) arguably became one of the most influential terms in political discourse during the Republican period, a malleable blueprint that touched on every aspect of the nation, ranging from the economy, culture, psychology, and religion to the countryside and, of course, the frontier.

During the Nanjing Decade (1927–37), the GMD party-state launched a series of initiatives in the name of reconstruction, addressing the frontier question. It recruited non-Han elites into its bureaucratic apparatus and launched a number of campaigns to develop its border areas, including *Xibei kaifa* (Open and Develop the Northwest). While the results were mixed, we should not underestimate the impact and ubiquity of Sun’s reconstruction scheme during this period. Remote provinces in China’s southwest under the control of regional militarists such as Liu Wenhui would reinterpret Sun’s blueprint to suit to their own needs and ends. Those venturing into the field during this period also invoked Sun’s principles, seeking to accommodate his principles and values within their own work.

The final cataclysmic event of this period was the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–45), which prompted an unprecedented number of people to forge their own frontier passage from areas occupied by the Japanese into either the GMD’s stronghold in the southwest (Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces) or the Chinese Communist Party’s base in Yan’an.
Factories and universities were dismantled and relocated to China’s interior, exposing workers and scholars to new landscapes and people. During this period of crisis, China’s frontier regions took on a still more heightened sense of importance, for now they were seen as critical to the survival of the Chinese nation. The training and recruitment of civilians as frontier workers in the field was now underpinned by one driving mission: to harness the resources of the frontier and the loyalties of its peoples to China’s war effort. Yet for those in the field who mostly came from China’s cities, how to reach out to those living in China’s border areas in such a harsh environment would remain a constant problem.

**Locating the Field**

This book focuses on the work carried out by these different actors along particular areas of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, located along the eastern borders of the Tibetan plateau. The geography and ethnic diversity of these areas contrasted sharply with the agrarian world of the Han Chinese population inhabiting China proper (neidi). The neat division between these two worlds, however, does not accurately reflect the complex interactions and struggles that took place in these areas. Located on the margins of empires, these regions were historically made up of a number of smaller polities that interacted among themselves at many levels. Studies on borderlands in Asia have proposed different frameworks for understanding the spatial and political dynamics shaping these regions. Concepts such as Zomia have sought to emphasize the wider networks connecting highland Asia, with important implications for state-society relations in these regions. While James Scott has argued that societies here had traditionally subverted the reach of the state until the mid-twentieth century, Mandy Sadan argues that these regions should be seen as pluricentral borderworlds where local, regional, and global relationships shaped the political identities of their inhabitants, such as the Kachin in the case of Burma.

Many of these approaches are indeed relevant in understanding the dynamics of the areas studied in this book. The pluricentral nature of these borderlands was important in defining identities along with shifting political loyalties as different imperial centres intervened over time. Labrang Monastery in the Tibetan region of Amdo was a good example of these dynamics, located in a “contested Tibetan environment on a geographic, social, political, ethnic, and religious frontier.” Successive regional and
imperial centres, led by Tibetans, Mongols, and Manchus sought to establish their dominance over the Tibetan Buddhist monastery, which was founded in 1709. In spite of these attempts, the moral and legal legitimacy of local lamas was strong enough to consolidate the monastery’s control over its vast properties, which expanded into Qinghai Province and northern Sichuan.34

Continuing down the map, we reach the area of northwest Sichuan, another important contact zone caught between expanding Tibetan and Chinese worlds. Border cities here, such as Songpan on the Upper Min River, located 250 kilometres from Chengdu (Sichuan’s provincial capital, discussed below), took travellers around eleven days to reach.35 Many Han Chinese settlements here (including Songpan) originally took the form of garrison cities but remained a minority population until the establishment of the PRC.36 The many valleys that shape this region were instrumental in shaping local identities, which did not always have a fixed geographical point.37 In the eyes of the Han Chinese, however, these groups were regarded as mostly Tibetan (fan) and in later Qing imperial times as Qiang and Jiarong (Gyalrong).38 The degree of Tibetization or Sinicization would vary according to each group’s geographical location in the region.

Further west, the region of Kham, with its many independent polities, presented its own challenges to both Tibetan and Chinese attempts to exert religious and political influence, respectively. The strong cultural influence of Tibet in this area by no means translated into direct control by Lhasa. In 1727, a sandstone stele established by the Qing at a pass in the Ningjing Mountains sought to demarcate those territories, with those east of the stele coming under Sichuan’s jurisdiction. This further undermined Tibetan claims to temporal authority in this part of the region.39 Despite the symbolism of Qing rule embedded in the stele, Qing authority over these polities was not direct either. Echoing a similar practice along many other border regions in the southwest, the Qing relied on the indirect rule of “native chieftains” (tusi), while Lhasa continued to exert spiritual influence on Kham’s monasteries by appointing abbots and training monks.40

The limits of Qing authority could also be observed in those frontier areas located between southern Sichuan and northern Yunnan. Here lay the mountain ranges known as Liangshan, where constant warfare took place between Han settlers and the Nuosu inhabitants.41 As with other areas in China’s southwest, the divide between mountains and lowlands was an important signifier of local identity and defined power relations at many levels. The Nuosu living in the Greater Liangshan area were a
dominant presence, leading Western explorers in the nineteenth century to call it “Independent Lololand.”

Cities also play an important role in this book, as sites of mediation and translation between fieldworkers and their audience. Not only did urban media in Shanghai and Nanjing play a role in disseminating their findings but study societies in many cases emerged from these hubs, seeking out the frontier as a source of debate and action. Central to this work, however, is the city of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. Despite its provincial status and remote location in relation to China’s coastal cities, the city was receptive to the many urbanistic trends reshaping cities across Asia during this period. Yet precisely because of its location it was able to keep China’s aspiring political centres at bay for most of the early twentieth century. Chengdu was unique in other respects. In contrast to other cities, it would play a unique role as a gateway city between the two worlds noted above: the Han agricultural world and the Tibetan highlands. The encounter of these two worlds would play out in visible ways for their residents. Nuosu elites, for example, studied at Chengdu’s military academy and the missionary West China Union University. Trade between farmers and herders took place in the city, and salt and Tibetan medicinal goods made their way to other cities in Sichuan such as Chongqing. Every winter, Tibetans and those from mountain areas in west Sichuan would visit the city, a constant reminder of its particular frontier status.

Chengdu was also important as a gateway for many of those venturing to China’s frontier for the very first time. For those visiting China’s interior, it provided a window into the Tibetan world as travellers from around China and the world flocked to the West China Union University’s museum to enjoy its ethnographic exhibitions. Missionaries based in Chengdu would leave every summer for west Sichuan and the Xikang region to carry out fieldwork. Wartime refugee students would later follow in the footsteps of the missionaries in what would become a rite of passage as they stepped into the world of exploration and fieldwork.

During the wartime period, refugees escaping the Japanese occupation made their way into southwest China’s provincial cities, such as Chongqing (Sichuan), Kunming (Yunnan), and Guilin (Guangxi). With the influx of refugee students and academics, these cities saw a brief flurry of scholarly activity that transformed them into important intellectual hubs. Chengdu was no exception, becoming a scholarly hub for Christian missionary colleges that relocated there seeking refuge. Alongside Chongqing, the nation’s wartime capital of the GMD, Chengdu would acquire the status of China’s secondary capital (peidu) for the remainder of the war. Given its privileged
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geographical and political position, it became a strategic hub for frontier studies, welcoming both Chinese and foreign scholars working in the field.

**Structure of This Book**

The five chapters of this book are divided into two main sections, focusing on the prewar and wartime period, respectively. Each chapter takes the reader through the multi-layered lives of those working on this particular region of China’s southwest frontier. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the region of Kham, providing a brief overview of the late Qing efforts to develop and study the region in light of British expansionism in Tibet. It then focuses on the role played by scholars recruited by militarist Liu Wenhui as part of his 24th Chuankang Frontier Defence Battalion. The blueprints laid out by this young generation of Chinese agriculturalists were pivotal to a new understanding of how Chinese citizens should relate to this new space and geography of the frontier.

Chapter 2 discusses the role played by missionary explorers during this same early period by looking at the fieldwork and studies carried out by the West China Border Research Society. Despite being foreigners on Chinese soil in the eyes of many, missionaries claimed a unique attachment and presence in the region, unlike their Han Chinese counterparts. This, they argued, enabled them to be true pioneers in the field. The challenges posed by nationalism after 1927 are then discussed, including how they impacted the missionaries’ position in the field.

Chapter 3 takes the reader to the urban centres of Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, discussing the prominence of the frontier studies as both spectacle and an object of study during the 1920s and 1930s, a phenomenon I call “frontier fever.” After portraying the anxieties of many Chinese citizens against the backdrop of the Manchurian (Mukden) Incident of 1931, it discusses the role played by the mass media, and how travel writing emerged as a legitimate genre of fieldwork to help push back against imperialism and build sovereignty in China’s frontier areas. Among those discussed is photographer Zhuang Xueben, whose travels into the region of Kham caused a great stir among urban audiences along the coast.

The outbreak of war against Japan in 1937 dominates the rest of the story told in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 starts with an overview of the War of Resistance and the impact of mass mobilization as factories and civilians made their way to the frontier. It then focuses on the wartime mobilization of Chinese social scientists and discusses their accidental new
focus of work in the frontier as a means of serving both the state and their own research agendas. Finally, Chapter 5 examines another experience in the field – that of student volunteers who took part in new modes of fieldwork that incorporated surveys and service as the means of building citizens along the frontier.

By following the journeys of these individuals, this book reveals an intricate network of transnational connections and global parallels with ongoing colonial enterprises shaping the world during this period. In doing so, it challenges the exclusively nationalist rhetoric commonly associated with this period. It is based on a series of archival discoveries from institutions around the world – the British Library, London School of Economics, Rockefeller Foundation, Sichuan Provincial Archives, Smithsonian Institution, and Divinity School Library at Yale University – that expose and reconnect the transnational lives and intersecting networks of missionaries, Chinese institutions, and individuals working on China's southwest frontier. This book ultimately aims to show how their careers echoed the intense process of internationalization that China was undergoing, and in so doing places China's policies toward its non-Han population within a global context of the internationalization of colonial policies supporting the welfare and development of its subjects. Encounters in the field produced networks that linked these actors to both the Chinese state and communities across the world engaged in debates over the future of minorities and contested border areas.

Frontier fieldwork had many different meanings for those taking part in this enterprise. Some saw it as a battlefield against superstition and imperialism, others as a battle against injustice and racism. Regardless of their position (and none of these were mutually exclusive), self-discipline and a new understanding of one's own identity were upheld as desirable outcomes. Fieldwork in this respect was both an intellectual and an affective experience. Empathy, rather than detachment, was encouraged in order to maximize the results of participants’ work on China's frontier. Inevitably, these practices led to larger questions of self-identity and to both the questioning and legitimization of asymmetries of power between observer and observed.

Many of the traits described above can be directly attributed to the influence of anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski. Malinowski's fieldwork methods, which encouraged direct engagement with subjects of study over a long period of time, would shape the discipline of anthropology for generations. But fieldwork heroics were also an important part of this
landscape. Here too Malinowski would consistently emphasize the importance of physical endurance and suffering as virtues of the fieldworker.\(^4\)

In the Chinese context, Malinowski was only one among many sources defining the methods and character of fieldwork on the frontier. Underlying the approaches followed by those studied in this book was the embrace of a missionary archetype whose conduct and devotion to their cause were worthy of emulation.\(^5\) Loathed and praised by many in China, the missionary had much to offer fieldworkers venturing into the Sino-Tibetan borderlands.

Missionaries in China’s border areas during this period would be portrayed by local officials as rivals in the field whose example would often put their Chinese counterparts to shame. In the early twentieth century, Zhao Erfeng, the frontier commissioner of Kham, shamed his own subordinates by invoking the missionary model. He chided his officials for their lack of effort in setting up schools:

> Even though the military situation is now only beginning to be settled, missionaries from various countries have already been coming to Kham one after another. If even the foreigners do not fear danger and distance and set themselves the task of quickly establishing missions, how can there be any excuse [for us] to leave [the Khampas], who belong to our country as its children and subjects, abandoned without proper instruction?\(^5\)

But there was more to this that could be gauged from the experience of missionaries for Chinese fieldworkers. Amy DeRogatis has used what she calls “moral geography maps” to describe the missionary experience in the American frontier, noting that for missionaries, the frontier’s harsh environment “also provided an arena in which to face physical obstacles that would lead to spiritual gains.”\(^5\) In China, braving harsh and alien environments in the field would lead to similar rewards – character building and physical strength deemed vital for the existence of the nation.\(^5\) In 1922, the China Continuation Committee published its exhaustive survey of Protestant missionary stations in China.\(^5\) A section devoted to “Work among Tibetans” noted that in Labrang, one of the main difficulties was “the food question” in that “the food of the Tibetans is such that for a foreigner it is very hard to partake of, and still harder to digest. And yet the itinerating missionary in this district has to eat it, for if he does not, he greatly offends his host and gets no opportunity to preach the Gospel.”\(^5\) Twenty years later in wartime Sichuan, Chinese scholars citing the missionary example
issued the same warnings to their students who were about to venture into the field. Adapting to local customs, long-term permanence in the field, and learning local languages – these were all traits of the missionary enterprise that offered valuable lessons for a new generation of Chinese fieldworkers embarking on their own secular mission of saving the nation (jiuguo) on the frontier.
I

Soldiers and Scholars
on the Frontier

In 1878, British traveller Edward Colborne Baber set out from Chongqing in China’s southwest on his third and last expedition in the region. His aim was to reach the remote Sino-Tibetan frontier, which had so far eluded many foreign travellers. On leaving Dajianlu, the last Chinese official outpost in Sichuan Province, he was greeted by a new landscape, which he described as follows:

Descending its northern slope, we soon found that we had left China behind. There were no Chinese to be seen. The valley was nearly all pasture-land, on which were grazing herds of hairy animals resembling immense goats. These I rightly conjectured to be yaks. On entering a hut, I found it impossible to communicate with the family, even a Sifan [Xifan], whom I had brought with me, being unintelligible to them; but they were polite enough to rescue me from the attack of the largest dogs I have ever seen, and to regale me with barley meal in a wooden bowl, which I had to wash down with a broth made of butter, salt, and tea-twigs. Further on we met a company of cavaliers, armed with matchlock and sabre, and decorated with profuse ornaments in silver, coral, and turquoise; a troop of women followed on foot, making merry at my expense. A mile or two further, and I came to a great heap of slates, inscribed with Sanskrit characters, whereupon I began to understand that we were in [Tibet]; for although [Tibet] proper is many hundred miles west of this point, yet traces of [Tibetan] race and language extend.¹
Baber’s words captured some of the many ambiguities of the landscape he had just encountered. Was this region really part of Tibet? What languages did its inhabitants speak if his interpreter was struggling to make himself understood? Had China really been left behind? Coming to terms with the geographical and political landscape of the Sino-Tibetan frontier would remain a constant challenge for those who attempted to chart its ethnic diversity and rugged landscape. Located on the eastern side of the Tibetan plateau, the region of Kham has always defied static categorizations. Scholars propose instead that we approach the region as a dynamic space, where processes of place making are in constant flux.2 Baber’s presence that year was itself an indication of this dynamic shaping process. A member of the British Foreign Office, his presence was testament to the growing influence of the British Empire in this part of the world. Almost twenty years later, Britain would invade Tibet over border conflicts in Sikkim followed by further tensions between Qing frontier officials and Lhasa in 1896.3

From the late nineteenth century to the 1911 Xinhai Revolution, the region of Kham underwent a number of radical transformations. Competing powers located in Sichuan and Central Tibet vying for influence in Kham now had to confront different challenges stemming from a changing international order as Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia made its way into the region. These changes also brought about new strategies at different levels of the Qing imperial government as it sought to consolidate power and influence over its border areas. Between 1850 and 1902, the Qing government mobilized people to China’s northeast area under the slogan “Moving People to Strengthen the Border” (yimin shibian) in the face of the Russian threat.4 Emma Teng has argued as well that Taiwan’s pacification campaigns occurred within this same logic in the face of Japanese expansionism, with the island officially becoming a province of the Qing empire in 1887.5

In the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, policies centred on what was known as gaitu guiliu, the removal of native chieftains and their replacement with government officials. This policy dated back to the military campaigns of the Qing Yongzheng Emperor (1723–35), who sought direct control over areas in Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan.6 It was not possible to conceive of such a policy in Kham, however, due to the counterbalance posed by Tibet for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In effect, much of the early nineteenth century saw a waning of Chinese influence, with constant unilateral Tibetan interventions against Tibetan Buddhist monasteries.7 Events in the latter half of the nineteenth century
drastically changed the situation. The presence of foreign powers on China’s borders convinced Qing court officials in Beijing to pursue a forward policy that envisioned the creation of a new Chinese province despite the resistance of local officials who feared a straining of resources.8

The roots of this forward policy can be found in the aftermath of military clashes between Central Tibet and Qing forces over the chieftaincy of Nyarong (present-day Xinlong County) in 1896. Military intervention in Nyarong was nothing new, and formed part of a longer history of Sino-Tibetan rivalry. However, the internationalization of conflict over Nyarong was now evident in the eyes of Qing officials wary of the Dalai Lama’s seeking of assistance from either Britain or Russia.9 As Qing troops occupied Nyarong, Sichuan’s governor general, Lu Chuanlin, began outlining his vision of a new Kham under direct imperial control to safeguard authority in the region. Despite not receiving official endorsement at the time, Lu’s publication of his views in 1900 and his position among the closest advisers of the Empress Dowager soon made his forward policy in Kham a central government initiative as well.10

Wu Guangyao, a magistrate in northern Sichuan’s Zhaohua County in 1907, later recalled the background to Lu Chuanlin’s policies. He began his account by explaining why Lu had been selected as governor general of Sichuan. Lu had served in the Lifanyuan (Ministry for the Management of the Non-Chinese Population), dealing with issues concerning Afghanistan, Burma, Vietnam, and Korea, among many others; this experience was highly regarded in a period when, according to Wu, “ocean and river’s strategic passes, flourishing land, one after another, became foreign concessions.”11

The removal of local leaders was one key element in Lu’s sweeping administrative changes, but bureaucratic changes on the frontier were also directly linked to economic reforms. Echoing policies on other border areas, land reclamation and agricultural colonies were deemed essential for both economic and political reasons. Another important economic policy involved support for the development of mining, which Lu believed to be the “road for a prosperous nation” (fuguo zhi dao).12 Lu’s thinking thus echoed the views of Zuo Zongtang, whose development policies in Xinjiang had led him to strongly believe that “colonization and natural resource development would enhance the empire’s control of its borderlands.”13

The growing influence of Lu’s views was also linked to a new stage of reforms in the Qing Court, known as the New Policies (Xinzheng), between 1902 and 1911.14 This paved the way for more radical reforms embodied in
both military reorganization and development schemes derived from colonial experiences of other powers in Africa and other places in Asia. A series of events accelerated the implementation of these reforms in the region of Kham. The 1904 invasion of Tibet by the British Younghusband expedition convinced Qing officials of the urgency of these new policies as a means of pushing back against foreign influence. That same year, Feng Quan, the designated assistant amban (minister) to Tibet, began establishing the first military agricultural colonies in Batang. One year later, a rebellion among the local population led to Feng’s flight and death in an ambush. From that point onward, a series of violent military campaigns led by Zhao Erfeng against local monasteries rapidly changed the nature of frontier government in the region.

In 1906, Zhao Erfeng became the first Sichuan-Yunnan frontier commissioner (Chuan Dian bianwu dachen). At the heart of Zhao’s reforms was the idea of “arresting material and spiritual flows into the region,” as noted by Scott Relyea, targeting both British economic expansion and Tibetan spiritual influence in the region of Kham. New ideas of sovereignty and colonization stemming from global experiences shaped Zhao’s rule during this period. French and Japanese colonial expansion schemes in Madagascar and Hokkaido, respectively, provided him with models for effectively asserting authority in the border regions. Schemes involving mining and sericulture were also intertwined with educational projects such as the construction of schools that would seek to weaken the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and instill new ideas of Chinese identity. Zhao Erfeng’s colonial enterprise continued to rely on military force, as seen in the occupation of Lhasa by his forces in 1910. The 1911 Xinhai Revolution brought this enterprise to a sudden end, however, and Zhao was executed in Chengdu as a Qing loyalist.

Many contemporary Chinese works studying the Qing’s frontier New Policies argue that the reasons for their failure lay not only in the collapse and corruption of the Qing Dynasty but also in the fact that these policies typically “violated the customs and traditions of minorities,” which made them impossible to realize. Yet an important ambivalence surrounding Zhao’s actions remains. Although the ruthlessness of his military campaigns is criticized, Zhao comes across in these accounts as a patriot endeavouring to build state institutions and breaking down the social structures of Tibetan serfdom.

The legacy of the New Policies was indeed a mixed one. They created great hardship in different frontier areas, for example, through high taxation
and land repossession, as seen in the case of Mongolia. Discontent was also voiced by Han officials only a few years after the policies were enacted. The above-cited Wu Guangyao drew a clear contrast between the frontier policies of the Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong Emperors and those under the New Policies. According to Wu, the difference lay in the heavy taxes imposed by the latter, whose colonial enterprise had produced nothing but chaos and disorder, as seen in the case of Feng Quan’s failed colonization scheme in Batang. Wu complained bitterly: “All nations are infected with New Policies, the people are poor and are not safe, how can business affairs flourish? ... The opening of mines and of lands, makes the Yi [a generic term for non-Han people] feel hate [while] Han officials strive for control and profit.” The woes of former county magistrate Wu must be seen in their proper context. When he wrote these words in 1923, west Sichuan was in complete disarray as the new republic struggled to maintain order, giving way to a long period of civil war and the rise of provincial powers. In the aftermath of the 1911 Revolution, the fragmented authority of the nascent Chinese Republic would indeed have serious repercussions at its borders. Former imperial domains such as Tibet and Mongolia declared independence and refused to recognize Chinese sovereign claims. Border issues between Tibet and the Republic of China remained unresolved, as seen in the Chinese refusal to sign the Simla Convention of 1914.

From this point onward, border regions in China saw a number of administrative reforms, efforts at territorial reorganization that were intended to stem the challenges of local and external forces. As seen in Justin Tighe’s study of Suiyuan in China’s northwest, central to these efforts was the remaking of administrative geography that ushered in changing conceptions of territory and political community in China’s nation-building process. In 1914, an important area of eastern Kham was designated by the Chinese Republic as the Chuanbian Special Administrative Region (SAR) (Chuanbian tebie xingzheng qu). Over time, it acquired a status of its own and officially become Xikang Province in 1939.

The expansion of these new forms of regional administration seeking to establish order may have mattered little for those on the ground. In the 1920s, Kham and its adjacent areas were in the hands of regional militarists who defied both Lhasa and Beijing. Yunnanese armies defying the central authority of the Beiyang regime (1912–28) had occupied vast swaths of Sichuan. Areas such as Liangshan in southern Sichuan were flooded with rifles now in hands of the Nuosu communities who defied Han Chinese frontier authorities.
Officials governing the Chuanbian SAR faced a number of challenges to their authority. Between 1913 and 1917, five different officials occupied the post of provincial garrison commander. In 1918, Chen Xialing was appointed to the post, signalling an important shift in frontier administration. Chen was part of a new generation of Chinese military officers who had studied overseas in Japan at the Imperial Japanese Army Academy (Rikugun Shikan Gakkō). Many of these officers brought back new ideas of modernity, with a particular emphasis on the role to be played by the military in nation building. In this respect, there is evidence that Chen was contemplating a series of road construction plans to develop the Chuanbian region in line with other colonization schemes of this period.26 It is perhaps no coincidence that during this same period Zhao Erfeng’s legacy was also being positively reassessed. Acrimonious feelings toward Zhao’s loyalty to the Qing were set aside by Han Chinese intellectuals. Scholars now extolled the virtues of Zhao’s strengthening of state administration in Kham as part of wider reforms that were a “necessary step for China to enter the modern phase.”27

At the time, foreign correspondents had little praise for Chen, noting his harsh methods in dealing with both civilians and soldiers. The *North China Herald* stated:

> It is said of Cheng Hsia-ling the Frontier Commissioner, that his entire outlook on life and affairs is military, therefore, his chief interests lying in that direction, he has but little sympathy for the civil department. If civil officials accommodate themselves to his martial propensity, and place military requirements before everything else, their relations with the Commissioner are good. If not, he has no use for them, and sooner or later they fall into disfavour and are replaced.28

The militarization of authority and society across China had now become the norm. Chen’s rule itself would come to an end in 1924 at the hands of another militarist, Liu Chengxun. Despite the facade of a central government based in Beijing, no single power ruled China during this period. Regional militarists, often referred to as warlords, controlled personal armies, enabling them to control resources and territories in a relatively independent manner.29 All paid homage to the existence of a unified republic, albeit nominally. Alliances shifted frequently, with civilians paying a high price after each ensuing battle. The balance of power shifted decisively in 1927 when the Guomindang (GMD) declared victory in its Northern Expedition (1925–26), defeating a number of regional militarists as it made
its way northward from its base in Canton. Yet even then, the authority of the GMD party-state was limited. Compromises had to be made with a number of regional figures as GMD supply lines became overstretched.

Regionalism was a force to be reckoned with. It was embraced by the likes of the Guangxi clique in South China, and, as Diana Lary has argued, could potentially be cast as a stepping stone to nationalism despite the differences that emerged with China’s aspiring political centres. Provincial militarists in outlying regions, such as Ma Bufang in Qinghai and Sheng Shicai in Xinjiang, remained relatively safe from the political encroachment of the GMD until the outbreak of the Second World War. They nonetheless faced the influence of what Gray Tuttle has called the “global forces” of imperialism, nationalism, and race that swept across Asia from the late nineteenth century onward. The growing influence of the Soviet Union was another critical factor.

In this tense and ever-changing environment, both regional militarists and the GMD engaged with a wide array of ideas and practices that were transforming the Chinese state and society at large. The localized actions and policies of figures such as Yan Xishan (Shanxi) and Wu Peifu (North China) reflected wider debates across the nation regarding the role of militarism as a guiding force in shaping and disciplining society. Alongside the competing ideologies that emerged from revolutionary parties such as the GMD and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), regional militarists offered their own views of society and modern bureaucracy, and called for the militarization (junduihua) of civilian life.

Facing the rise of the GMD party-state from 1927 onward, militarists such as Yan Xishan, Bai Chongxi (Guangxi), and He Jian (Hunan) engaged ideologically with the meaning of Sun Yat-sen’s outline for national reconstruction. While claiming allegiance to its principles, they reserved the right to revise these blueprints to suit provincial conditions, all in the name of national unity.

Militarists who controlled border areas in China could also sympathize with a number of Sun’s earlier points regarding the development of these regions. In 1922, Sun published a book titled The International Development of China, in which he set out a vision of economic growth for China to be fuelled by foreign investment. In his view, Mongolia and Xinjiang held great potential for China’s reconstruction: “Soldiers can be used as a pioneer party for the work of the ports of the railway, of the development of the adjacent land beyond the Great Wall, and of preparing Dolon Nor as a jumping ground for further colonizing developments of the Great Northern Plain.”
Sun’s vision for China’s reconstruction ideologically enshrined land settlement policies in China’s border areas. Mapping out railway networks that would connect China’s northwest and northeast to the rest of the nation, Sun called for both the state and the military to develop colonization schemes for these regions. He drew inspiration from both old Chinese models of colonization and the new models of agricultural settlement established in many regions outside China during this period. Building sovereignty with farmers had become a global practice. Settlement policies toward the end of the nineteenth century in new Latin American republics such as Argentina and Chile continued into the 1920s, and Japanese farmers settled in the contested region of Manchuria. Chinese views on sovereignty, settlement, and border areas were hardly new in this context.

After Sun’s death in 1925, the central state he had envisaged had limited options. Yet regional militarists looked across China and beyond for sources of inspiration in order to implement similar policies that would suit their own particular views of state and society. Sun’s original call for an “international development” had failed miserably in its intention to secure foreign capital. Yet the influence of the “international” could nonetheless be found in a new generation of Chinese students studying agricultural sciences abroad who would go on to develop state-sponsored experimental farms in the far reaches of China’s border areas.

Along the Sino-Tibetan border, local military authorities also viewed the colonization of Kham as an essential component of frontier policy, to counter the perceived threat of encroachment by Lhasa and Britain. Seeking to emulate colonial administrative practices observed in British India and Manchuria, they argued that to develop Kham would require not only military force but also deep local knowledge of the region. In pursuit of that knowledge, a new generation of recruits was absorbed into a militarized administration, and a mutually reinforcing relationship was forged between soldiers and scholars.

Liu Wenhui and the 24th Chuankang Frontier Defence Battalion

As battles flared in China’s borderlands, the 24th Chuankang Frontier Defence Battalion (hereafter 24th Battalion) commanded by regional militarist Liu Wenhui geared up for a different type of campaign. Liu Wenhui took command of the battalion after defeating Liu Chengxun in
1927, and the incorporation of Kham now fell into his hands. Picking up the pieces of Zhao Erfeng’s earlier colonial efforts in the region, he drew up a new blueprint of “frontier administration” (bianzheng). It was part of a wider effort to colonize and secure the territories of eastern Kham along the Sino-Tibetan border.

Frontier administration was of course nothing new in late Chinese imperial history. As noted by Peter Perdue, the Qing Dynasty in the eighteenth century had devised a series of practices to govern its frontier areas, such as the fixing of boundaries, the classification of peoples, and the designation of reliable local leaders, practices that could also be observed in the Ottoman and Russian empires. As a result, the bureaucratic structure that emerged invariably reflected the character of the frontier, distinct from that governing other regions within the Qing empire. Other scholars, such as Benjamin Hopkins, observe a universal tendency in the late nineteenth century in which frontier rule adopted by modern states also followed similar models of governance. Using the term “frontier governmentality,” Hopkins argues that we can observe “a common set of governing norms, administrative practices, and legal regimes that together constituted a discrete form of rule unique to frontier spaces.” Liu Wenhui’s particular vision of frontier administration was thus built both on the legacies of the Qing empire and on new ideas of frontier governance circulating around the world during this period.

Liu’s 24th Battalion saw itself as a vanguard force of soldiers leading the way in colonizing the region. In fieldwork that he sponsored, scholars carried out surveys and provided specialized training to soldiers in order to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the region. Soldiers and scholars together were expected to play a crucial role in educating and mobilizing the province as a whole to support Liu’s vision of a modern frontier: one that could fend off the threats of foreign imperialism while strengthening its economic ties to the rest of the nation.

After defeating his rival Liu Chengxun, Liu Wenhui proceeded to set up the Xikang Special Region Administration Committee (Xikang tequ zhengwu weiyuanhui) in Kangding in 1928, and stationed forces in the area. This was an example of the rapid administrative changes the region underwent during this period, preparing the groundwork for the eventual establishment of a new province. In this, Liu and others were echoing Zhao Erfeng’s vision of strengthening China’s border areas through direct control of the region.

Like many other militarists emerging at the time, Liu Wenhui was a graduate of the prestigious Baoding Military Academy in north China.
He commanded a force of 200,000 soldiers at the age of thirty-two in 1927, but suffered defeat in 1933 at the hands of his nephew and rival Liu Xiang. Liu Wenhui’s 24th Battalion was instrumental to his plans to secure Xikang under his rule. In what Joseph Lawson has termed “warlord colonialism,” his attempt to build state institutions in the region was driven by local agents and interests that eschewed links with the central government, notwithstanding the nominal allegiance rendered to the GMD in this period.

Liu Wenhui’s vision for Kham was framed by his militaristic outlook, echoing the violent nature of geopolitics surrounding China in this period. The uncertainties of border disputes and the need to push back against British and Tibetan claims necessitated an assertive and bold approach with clear objectives. Among those objectives, as stated by the battalion, were: “1. Building railways, 2. Recovering lost land, 3. Resettlement: dividing and reclaiming land,” and most important of all, the overthrow of all British and Tibetan unequal treaties. Yet there was more to frontier policy than bringing order to the region through attention to land and building infrastructure. The scattered nature of local knowledge and facts required urgent attention from the Battalion’s officials:

We hope ... amidst this temporary chaos, to bring about the discovery of historical facts of the border areas, to collect the scattered odds and bits of reports. At the same time compile a summary of all aspects regarding Kham and Tibet’s past and present, outline essential points to brief the reader. We hope that the audience's way of looking at things will irradiate all the way to Kangding in order to go West.

Further contributing to this perception of chaos and disorder in the border regions were outdated imperial methods of administration. Liu denounced the corruption of local Chinese officials and merchants, and rebuked Qing imperial “loose rein” (jimi) policy as ineffective in establishing a true foothold in the region. Global forces also had to be reckoned with. Echoing a common trope among Chinese reformers seeking to protect local industries and societies in China’s rural areas from the onslaught of foreign-made goods, Liu condemned the disruptive nature of foreign capitalism in frontier areas.

Liu Wenhui claimed that his efforts would redress economic hardship in the region, to “protect the country and defend the people (baoguo weimin), settle society, preserve what has already been constructed, and advance the progress of civilization.” China’s border areas thus required
a new type of military personnel who could embrace the new spirit of the
times. Seen in this light, colonization became a key weapon in a battle to
build not only sovereignty but also character among Chinese citizens.
Land settlement policies thus had the potential to rectify the “lack of ad-
venturousness” in Chinese people (wuduixing) and encourage them to
instead emulate the bold “antagonistic nature” (youduixing) of Western
races, “whose tracks are found in all five continents and are currently the
world’s main protagonists.”52 Those taking part in land settlement, as a
site of ongoing battle and struggle, should “promote a combative spirit
when facing the future.” They should strive to emulate Japan’s common
mutual spirit, “German people’s composure, French people’s sharpness,
Americans’ talent for creativity, and British organization.”53

Recruiting Scholars to the Field

Given such rhetoric, it is not surprising that Liu Wenhui’s efforts to build
a militarized administration in the region went hand in hand with his
recruitment of scholars to join the ranks of his 24th Battalion. Bringing
soldiers and scholars into a symbiotic relationship was the key to building
an effective and stabilizing force on China’s frontier. By disseminating
knowledge and publicizing the results of surveys, they would “root out
the poor quality skills of the frontier administrators of the past.”54 Liu’s
drive to build a new administrative elite echoed a wider trend among other
militaristic regimes seeking to revamp traditional forms of governance and
administration.55 Supporting the fieldwork of scholars that could enhance
state (and regional) power was thus a powerful trend in this period, as seen
in Yan Xishan’s backing of Walter Lowdermilk and Ren Chengtong’s work
on deforestation in North Shanxi.56 A generation of newly educated youths
was being recruited into the ranks of militarist bureaucracies across China
with the aim of undermining and ultimately replacing older (and local)
elites in the process.57

Disseminating knowledge also required proper channels to do so. Liu’s
main channel for disseminating news, articles, and official reports among
his staff was the 24th Battalion’s journal, Bianzheng (Frontier Administration).
Each cover of the journal was adorned by a colourful image playing on
ideological themes, such as frontier development, racial harmony, and
anti-imperialism. One cover published in 1931 portrayed a mounted Han
Chinese official carrying the new GMD flag of the Chinese Republic
marching forward with scholars, students, and settlers and being greeted
30  Soldiers and Scholars on the Frontier

Figure 1.1  Frontier officials, scholars, and settlers open the way for the Chinese Republic | Cover of Bianzheng [Frontier Administration] 7 (July 1931)

by Tibetan nomads (see Figure 1.1). In the backdrop, an eagle is carrying away a flag of the British Empire.\(^{58}\) Bianzheng thus seemed to play a series of roles, showcasing the achievements of 24th Battalion troops and personnel and possibly aiming at a wider audience to raise awareness of China’s frontier question in the region. In this it was different from other military journals circulating at the time in China’s northeast and the National Revolutionary Army (the military arm of the GMD), which focused on the debates surrounding military modernization held by Chinese intellectual officers.\(^{59}\)

The archetype of the scholar-administrator envisaged by Liu for his frontier enterprise can also be gauged from the journal. Among dozens of articles dealing with military updates and surveys, a serialized play titled To the Frontier (Dao biandi qu) tells the story of a young Chinese geologist
who has recently returned from his studies abroad and is stirred into action upon hearing of the imminent invasion of Tibet by the British. Leaving behind family and friends, Kong Zhenyuan braves the hardships of inhospitable landscapes and the harassment of local Tibetans to join the ranks of Liu Wenhui’s forces, where he deploys all his skills and knowledge to contribute to the development of the province, heralding a new chapter in China’s frontier question.60

Whether To the Frontier was performed across the province as part of Liu’s recruitment drive for talent is not clear. It may well have been, for in this period the deployment of drama troupes was a common stratagem of both warlord governments and CCP movements as they sought to promote their economic and social agendas.61 Certainly the role of scholars embedded in militarized structures of power would become one of the distinctive traits of Liu’s forces. The idea was of course not exclusive to China. French colonial administration in Indochina during the same period began to incorporate ethnologists as part of its personnel in order to face the challenges posed by the rebellion of “native Annamites.”62 The trend can also be observed in the case of the Brazilian Amazon during the 1930s. The government’s Serviço de Proteção aos Índios (Indian Protection Service) was composed mostly of military engineers, yet maintained very close ties with the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. The museum was highly valued for the scientific credibility of its expedition surveys and opinions on matters of indigenous policies.63 In each of these cases, a bureaucratic structure in the hands of the military sought to create links with scholarly institutions, or even incorporated personnel from such institutions into its own rank and file. Liu was thus following a global trend.

In 1928, a Frontier Affairs Department (Bianwuchu) was created within the structure of the 24th Battalion and recruited scholars on a regular basis to train the battalion’s officers.64 Heading the department was Hu Heru, a young graduate in agricultural sciences whose time in Beijing had put him into contact with new interpretations of “practical scholarship” (jingshi zhiyong) as well as trends in mass education led by enlightened Chinese youth.65 Hu’s educational background and earlier writings revealed a pressing concern for agricultural reform and education as means of addressing China’s problems in this period.66 Even more telling was his frustration over the weakness and dysfunctional nature of China’s central civilian government in Beijing during his time there as a student. Contrary to the widespread sentiment against warlords established in cities, Hu was drawn to the militaristic approach of Liu Wenhui as the most effective means of bringing practical work to fruition.67 Donning a military uniform as the
Frontier Affairs Department head, Hu Heru embodied a new generation of young scholars who renounced their civilian status and embraced a paramilitary discipline.68

Under Hu's leadership, other scholars began to join the ranks of the 24th Battalion. All shared a common provincial background rooted in Sichuan together with a sense of urgency and commitment to the importance of fieldwork. Du Xiangrong, one of the first of these scholar-recruits under Liu's command, made clear in his lectures to soldiers the importance of direct engagement with one's subject of study. Direct engagement was the key to good governance:

When we talk about drawing water from the well what we mean is that one must go to the edge of the well. When we talk about troops what we mean is that one must go to the troops. One can then also say that when we talk about governing the frontier what we mean is that one must go to the frontier; when talking about frontier affairs what we mean is that one must have gone to the frontier ... Everything one hears is not as good as seeing it for oneself.69

Ren Naiqiang was another recruit with an academic background similar to that of Hu Heru. His career also reveals the intricacies of provincial networks that helped advance the interests of Sichuan's local elites through the pooling and training of young talent. Ren's native place in Sichuan, Nanchong, was home to one of Sichuan's best-known educators, Zhang Lan, a reformer who believed in the importance of finding practical applications for education in the realms of industry and commerce.70 Ren had been a student of Zhang, who, seeing his potential talent, not only selected him for study at the university in Beijing but also raised the funds to send him there in 1915.71

In Beijing, Ren majored in agriculture (nongye), economics (jingji), and geography (dilixue) – three disciplines that were considered at the time to hold the key to China's future. Ren Naiqiang's son, Ren Xinjian, recalled that he had a strong belief in the notion of yinong liguo (building a country based on agriculture).72 The phrase was indeed popular in China during the 1920s among those who embraced a new type of agrarian nationalism that sought to fend off the evils of industrialization and imperialism. It would acquire different meanings in the context of agricultural settlements in the border regions of Kham.73

After graduating in Beijing, Ren Naiqiang returned to Sichuan and became an instructor in geography. More importantly, he began an exhaustive
search for historical and geographical materials on Sichuan Province, which would be published in 1928 as *Sichuan shili*. As Ren Xinjian recalled, his father was drawn to the frontier by connections from his student days in Beijing. A former classmate, Fu Zinan, wrote to ask for his help, and in 1929 Ren Naiqiang took up the official post of inspector (*shichayuan*) for the Xikang area.74

Ren Naiqiang played a pioneering role in the mapping and ethnographic surveying of the west Sichuan and Xikang areas and later laid the foundations in China for modern Tibetology (*Xizangxue*), developed in the post-Liberation period. In his eyes, the actual gap in knowledge concerning Xikang literally left blank spaces on Chinese maps, creating an urgent need to commence surveying. Ren’s first surveys were indicative of a new trend in research that involved not only bibliographical work but also venturing into the field in order to update what were now seen as outdated and unsuitable surveys of agricultural property and its geographical distribution. His arduous mapping of the region provided the blueprints for the opening and expansion of the frontier as interpreted by Liu Wenhui and the central government. Ren spent over a year surveying eleven counties on the frontier, tramping around the country accompanied by two students and carrying a barometer. He made meticulous notes of every single aspect of the terrain being surveyed, drawing the clothing and dwellings of the inhabitants he encountered (Figure 1.2).

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*Figure 1.2* Woodcut illustration of a nomadic tent | Ren Naiqiang [Ren Xiaozhuang, pseud.], *Xikang guiyi lü* [Records of strange and bizarre Xikang] (Chengdu, 1930?)
A brief biography of Ren, written by his son Ren Xinjian in 2006, is peppered with references to the motivations for his work in the field during that time. One in particular stands out: “encouraging the unity of Han and Tibetan peoples (Han Zang tuanjie)” by means of scholarly work and cooperation between the two.75 The idea of minzu tuanjie (national or ethnic unity) echoed in Ren Xinjian’s words should be understood as part of the contemporary language utilized by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in its approach toward ethnic minorities. Uraldyn Burag argues that minzu tuanjie is deployed by the CCP against its antithesis, minzu fenlie (national or ethnic splittism); in this context, national unity emerges as a “hegemonic management device to manoeuvre in the context of China’s diversity.”76 Along with the supersession of ethnic identities by the larger Zhonghua minzu (Chinese nation), the Han emerge in this discourse as a “nucleus vanguard” to ensure unity, stability, and economic development as evinced in later policies in Xinjiang as studied by David Tobin.77

In light of the foregoing, how are we to understand Ren Naiqiang’s fieldwork in the particular context of the 1920s and ’30s when examining these issues of inter-ethnic relations and unity? As a Han Chinese scholar, Ren Naiqiang certainly moved away from the commonly held view among Chinese literati that traditionally saw China’s border areas as a place of banishment. His relationship with his subject of study in the field was far more complex, however. During his fieldwork in 1929, he met and later married Luo zhe Qingcuo (Tibetan name: Blo gros chos mtsho), a daughter of the prominent Kham family Rgya ri tshang, rulers of Upper Nyarong (modern-day Xinlong County). As noted by Lara Maconi, Ren’s conscious and “ethnologically utilitarian” decision to do so was not unusual among Han scholars working in the region, enabling him to fully immerse himself in Tibetan culture and to learn the language.78

Large questions loomed over Ren Naiqiang in defining his views on Tibet’s culture and inhabitants, both as a scholar and as a frontier official. During this period, he embarked on the first translation of the Tibetan epic Gesar into Chinese, titling it Barbarian Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Man sanguo). The term he used in the title to describe Tibetans (“barbarian”; Chinese: man or manzi) reflected the embedded prejudice of many in China against non-Han groups in this period.79 The term (and others) would pose similar dilemmas for other Chinese scholars studied in this book (e.g., Yang Chengzhi and Zhuang Xueben in Chapter 3), who advocated for these groups to define their own names based on Sun Yat-sen’s principle of racial equality (minzu pingdeng). It was only in 1939, in the midst of China’s War of Resistance against Japan (1937–45), that the GMD officially
commissioned ethnographer Rui Yifu to review Chinese ethnonymy and remove derogatory animal classifiers for groups inhabiting the southwest. Yet Ren Naiqiang was not oblivious to these highly political discussions taking place in China during the 1930s. In his book *Xikang guiyi lü (Records of Strange and Bizarre Xikang)*, he recalled hearing from a friend that the GMD had banned the use of the term *manzi* in order to foster good relations between different races, to which he responded:

> If one cannot call the people of Xikang territory *manzi*, then we should call them *Kangren* [person of Kham]. However, “Kang” is a name of a place; it does not have any racial or tribal connotation. The two words in *kang ren* [Kham + person], are definitely not akin to those found in *Manren* [a Manchu person], *Mengren* [a Mongol person], *Huiren* [a Hui person], *Miaoren* [a Miao person], which are suitable names. If one is guided by those who live in Kang territory, then it would include numerous Han and Chekewa [mixed Han and Tibetan].

Here, Ren was proposing a broader use of the term *Kangren*, which would include all the various groups inhabiting the region of Xikang. It was an administrative vision that prioritized the building of a regional identity for Xikang, leaving many unanswered questions regarding ethnic identities and their individual fate in a modern Chinese nation-state.

Ren Naiqiang and Hu Heru are good examples of a new emerging frontier bureaucracy that took pride in both its scholarly commitment and its technical expertise in the field. Both men also embraced provincial loyalties that sought to bolster Xikang’s status as a true shield (*pingfan*) for the Chinese nation. Yet the practical application of knowledge was only one of the many skills of their trade. A product of their time, they too believed in the importance of the Chinese Enlightenment’s seeking to guide and educate the masses regarding their mission on the frontier. In this, they supported Liu Wenhui’s strategy to direct knowledge of the frontier back to the masses. It fell to them as scholars to translate the significance of the frontier not only for soldiers but also for society as a whole.

**Bringing the Frontier to the Masses:**

**The 1929 Frontier Region Customs and Products Exhibition**

In April 1929, a large tent was unfolded and set up in the Qingyang flower market of Chengdu. On entering, the audience encountered a large display
of ethnographic objects, natural products, photographs, and even “frontier people” (bianmin) walking in leisurely fashion around the venue (Figure 1.3). The Frontier Region Customs and Products Exhibition (Bianqu fengwu zhanlanhui) was a one-time event orchestrated by Liu Wenhui, who in September 1928 ordered the officers of his 24th Battalion to begin collecting every possible type of product, handicraft, and religious artifact in the districts under their control. As one of the organizers put it, once these objects were displayed, “we have the profound mysteries [aomi] of the frontier region completely revealed before the eyes of our people.”

That an event of this kind should be held in Chengdu was neither a coincidence nor completely novel. Public exhibitions or so-called World’s Fairs had originated in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, a product of the expansive capitalistic ventures that stretched around the world. Drawing trade, industry, ethnographic exhibits, music, and art into a single space, these exhibitions were very much about displaying Western notions of universal progress, consecrating imperialist ventures through the prism of a civilizing mission. The importance attached to these exhibitions in Western countries did not go unnoticed in China. Susan Fernsebner has shown how they were studied at the end of Qing Dynasty by Chinese intellectuals, who found in them elements that could be useful to China in its redefinition as a nation. They thus helped inspire the first provincial
and national exhibitions around China. At their heart was the notion that China's citizens, regardless of gender or social status, should receive an “education in material things.” Through the promotion of provincial and national exhibitions, a new idea of the nation would emerge.

The discourse of economic competition that defined most of these exhibitions reached Sichuan during the late-Qing New Policies period, when the Commercial Bureau created under Governor General Xiliang was designed to develop the great untapped economic potential of the province in order to compete against foreign products. The bureau embraced the enticing promise of fairs and exhibitions. In 1906, it transformed Chengdu’s traditional Qingyang flower festival into a new public event, a fair that they intended would become “a stimulant for entrepreneurial energies across the province.” Liu Wenhui’s decision to mount the exhibition in the old Qingyang flower market was thus no isolated event. It reflected the patterns of a discourse of economic modernity and pedagogical imperatives that had been developed by the local elite and then transmogrified into public exhibitions. As Kristin Stapleton has pointed out, in the 1920s these expositions in Chengdu took on a heightened nationalist character; thus, the “successful staging of the exposition became a mark of good administration for Sichuan militarists.”

There was novelty in the Frontier Region Exhibition: it was the first time the frontier itself had been used as the main theme of a public exhibition. It was not, however, the first effort by Sichuan’s local elite to cast the frontier as an object of learning and spectacle. Missionaries recalled that the first commercial fair in 1906 had displayed “an exhibit of Tibetan artifacts brought back by Zhao Erfeng from his campaign to shore up Qing authority west of Sichuan.” Visiting Chengdu in October 1928, Cao Yabo, the Wuchang Uprising veteran and Guomindang offi cial, praised Yang Sen’s recent eforts to educate the masses and to create public spaces. In addition to the Commercial Goods Improvement Exhibition Hall (Gai shangpin chenlieguan), which displayed minerals and fauna from the region, Cao noted the display of ancient objects (guwu) in the library adjacent to the exhibition hall. Here could be found “new unearthed Buddhist idols, sacred stone statues, Tibetan classical texts [sutras], Hua Miao Holy Bibles.” Furthermore, Yang had set up a Popular Education Building (Tongsu jiaoyuguan), which had in its collection an embalmed takin (yeniu), a Himalayan antelope, which had been originally presented as a gift by a local chieftain (tusi) to a Tibetan Buddhist temple in 1889. The embalmed takin was used again by Liu Wenhui in his own exhibition soon afterward (Figure 1.4).
The didactic intent of the Frontier Region Exhibition was apparent everywhere. Signs outside the tent carried graphic reminders for those attending of the perils of British imperialism oppressing the Tibetan people. The opening of the frontier, these signs promised, would “smash [dapo] through one difficulty after another,” such as Nuosu banditry, traitors, communications, and British imperialism – each depicted as a stone slab awaiting the crushing blow of a pioneer’s axe (Figure 1.5). Inside the tent, in true panoptical style, visitors were introduced to the natural products of the region, its flora and fauna displayed alongside inhabitants dressed in full ethnic regalia (Figure 1.6). The importance of the visual was at the forefront of the organizers’ planning – a master plan designed not only to dazzle spectators but more importantly to instruct Chengdu’s inhabitants on the plans for frontier expansion and even to draw the attention of scholars elsewhere to its significance. As Liu Wenhui put it: “In order to plan territorial expansion which will allow us to inhabit the frontier, displays and viewing have been used for the convenience of our compatriots ... This exhibition thus utilizes the flourishing of frontier culture (fabhuang bianqu wenhua) to catch the attention of the scholars of China proper to research the affairs of the frontier.”
Figure 1.5 “Open up the frontier lands. Smash through one difficulty after another” | Bianqu fengwu zhanlanhui yingpianji

Figure 1.6 Frontier people on display: Tibetans and Nuosu people in full ethnic regalia | Bianqu fengwu zhanlanhui yingpianji
surprising that the exhibition was later memorialized in its own photo collection book, providing us with a rare glimpse at such an event.93

One can only speculate on how Chengdu’s citizenry responded to the exhibition. As a public event, it was certainly intended to convey the significance of the frontier for the destiny of the Chinese nation, while at the same time seeking the active participation of the province’s inhabitants in these efforts. One of its purported objectives was explicitly stated as being to “stimulate in our countrymen the great ambition to go to the frontier.” Drawing a parallel with other ventures in world history, the organizers argued:

Columbus read Marco Polo’s diaries, admired the fertile and rich lands of East Asia, its plentiful products. He then gradually developed an adventurous ambition and quickly set upon the enterprise of discovering a new continent. Columbus discovered a new continent, went back to Europe loaded with gold, silver, cotton, valuable and rare objects among other things. As a consequence, the popular feelings were greatly aroused, thus engaging in opening new lands ceaselessly in a continuous stream.94

**Frontier People on Display**

Besides displaying the frontier’s purported wealth in the form of natural resources, the exhibition’s theme hinged on another important element: the so-called frontier people and the role they played in both China’s imperial past and its Republican future. As noted above, the exhibition included not only living examples of these inhabitants but also a wide array of ethnographic objects that were showcased and labelled to explain their usage to the public. Although the Frontier Exhibition was not defined explicitly as an ethnographic show, it had many of the elements present in such displays found in the West and Japan.

An important aspect of the exhibition was the display of artifacts such as weapons or commonly used utensils (*changyong qiju*) belonging to the inhabitants of Tibet and Xikang (Figure 1.7). As the organizers stated, the display of such objects was an example of how the frontier could be a source of scientific research.95 Invoking the works on civilization written by British anthropologist C.G. Seligman, they argued:

Seligman said: “In the history of all civilizations, the major part is to be found in the history of its arts,” thus we must desire to go forward and study
certain types of people’s civilization level, and the forms of their society and livelihood. Namely, being able to infer their level from their utensils. In this exposition there are portions of butter, tsampa (zanba), all of which are household utensils of the Yi [i.e., non-Han people]. One can then infer their level of civilization and the still-existing gap between nomadic times and agricultural times. Yi utensils are mostly copper and iron ones, porcelain ones are very few.96

These words reflected the influence of an evolutionist paradigm that had its roots in Morgan’s theory of progressive stages of material culture. In defining the levels of progress of different societies in materialistic terms (i.e., through the study of material artifacts), a scientific discourse emerged that placed the frontier people at a lower stage of development than their Han Chinese counterparts. The continuities of such a discourse were later found in the CCP’s ethnic minorities policy orchestrated in the early stages of Liberation.

Liu’s army of scholars were engaging with one of the most influential anthropological paradigms for this period – the idea of a primitive society and its teleological path toward the emergence of the nation-state.97 As Adam Kuper has argued: “The idea of primitive society served imperialists
and nationalists, anarchists and Marxists ... all societies were either based on blood or soil. These principles of descent and territoriality were clearly related to ideas of race and citizenship, which were central to political discourse.”98 The idea of the “primitive” in this particular Chinese context was crucial in defining the next stages of material progress and social organization of these border areas within a wider framework of national unification, be it in a colonizing context or later on as part of a socialist transformation.99

Material artifacts, however, did not provide the only key to understanding the relatively low position of the frontier’s inhabitants on the evolutionary timescale. Geographical isolation was seen as one of the main causes behind this apparent stagnation in cultural and material terms. Nature on the frontier was seen as a constraining force that caused frontier societies to lead an “abnormal” (jixing) lifestyle that condemned them to “economic self-sufficiency” (zizu jingji zhuangtai).100

Yet, the plight of the frontier people was not exclusively due to their geographical location. Frontier people were cast in the same category as Chinese peasants, unsurprisingly given the agricultural training of many of these scholars, who were also involved in rural reconstruction projects.101 Peasants and frontier people shared the same diagnosis accounting for their backwardness, with superstition and obstinate tradition rendering them unable to break out of this cycle.102

Understanding the mentality (xinli) of frontier inhabitants could also help unlock further mysteries surrounding their behaviour. Parallels with colonial experiences in Africa were explicitly made by these Chinese scholars. In the eyes of these scholars, totemic structures held the key to understanding their “bravery and resourcefulness in battle” (yonggan shanzhan), akin to “African natives” who regarded the killing of people as a condition for marriage.103 Frontier administrators, according to the special proclamation of the 24th Battalion had to remember that emotion (qinggan) was an important element of social structure, and that in semi-civilized (bankaihua) societies, only emotion could bring about a mighty force.104 The reference to emotion here echoed the works found in the West on “primitive mentality,” which emphasized the pre-rational mindset of colonial subjects in Africa and Asia.

In a similar manner, religion was presented as part of a lowly evolutionary stage that did not fit the needs of the present world. Alongside the campaigns that saw religion in Chinese rural society disciplined, reorganized, or banned, the labelling of certain religious practices and beliefs under the term mixin (superstition), “brought with it a much more absolutizing
distinction between the scientific and the primitive.”105 This point was also emphasized through lectures imparted to frontier personnel by specialists who had carried out surveys in the region. Du Xiangrong, for example, who had recently surveyed Xikang, gave his views on why these societies resisted modernization:

It seems that the distant Yi feel contented with a simple and crude lifestyle (jianluo), [and are] not willing to develop natural wealth to its utmost, and receive the influence of religion, cultivated under irrational superstition, such as so-called Mountain gods, forbidding land colonization and the probing of minerals ... most men study Lamaism (lamajiao), no productive affairs ensue, labour force is lacking, the economy thus is backwards;106

The power of lamas as a force to be reckoned with was nothing new, of course. Zhao Erfeng’s military campaigns had targeted these in order to establish control over eastern Kham. The category of “Lamaism,” however, now made its way into the works of these scholars. Understanding its significance and grip on society would enable administrators to penetrate the mindset of frontier inhabitants and eventually lead the way toward emancipation and the reconstruction of a new Chinese republic. Over time, this discourse in China would evolve, and new generations of anthropologists would seek to cast the role of religion in the frontier in a more positive light, albeit within the framework of nation building and Enlightenment (see Chapter 4 regarding Li Anzhai’s fieldwork in Labrang).

Like commercial exhibitions, and in many ways a product of them, ethnographic exhibitions emerged in a period when colonial expansion had broken down geographical barriers. Different types of so-called tribal societies were brought to the European metropolis, where they came under the scrutiny of scientists and the general public. Ethnographic showcases, as studied by Raymond Corbey, thus became an important medium in which progress and civilization could be defined vis-à-vis the savage Other.107 Rising imperial powers such as Germany saw a proliferation of the Volkerschau (ethnographic shows), which were not only profitable for their owners but also deemed important in the promotion of knowledge and the “stimulating of nationalistic zest for colonial expansion.”108

Chinese ethnographic exhibitions were thus part of a global trend. Yet this modernizing discourse must also be seen as part of the larger Republican project that sought to transform Chinese society and its citizens as a whole. The 24th Battalion’s claim that frontier administration under its control would abolish the abuses of former times, improve the life of
the frontier people, and consequently unite the force of the people was a clear example of the extension of a modernizing discourse that is more often associated only with anti-religious or rural reconstruction campaigns. By utilizing current theories of anthropology and sociology to explain the differences between the frontier people and those of China proper, a scientific backdrop was created to justify the 24th Battalion’s schemes to revolutionize frontier administration and liberate its inhabitants from “backwardness” and “imperialist oppression.”

Despite the impressive array of resources displayed by Liu Wenhui after his rise to power in 1927, by 1933 he faced defeat at the hands of his nephew Liu Xiang. Retreating to Kangding, Liu Wenhui set up a new power base and, after wrangling with the central authorities, it was decided that Sichuan’s county of Xichang together with the special administrative region would be amalgamated to create “Xikang.” This enabled Liu Wenhui to continue with both his frontier enterprise and his sometimes defiant, sometimes loyal alliance with the central authorities of the GMD. In 1934, he took charge of the Xikang provincial reconstruction committee. Impressed with the work of Ren Naiqiang, Liu invited him to join the committee, which Ren did, remaining until December 17, 1938. Ren continued to work on a series of reforms, such as addressing the Tibetan corvée system (wula), seeking to further the work of soldiers and scholars on the frontier.

Liu Wenhui’s approach can be observed in later publications by other local administrations in frontier areas such as Ebian in southwest Sichuan. Photos of agricultural technicians promoting land reclamation to incredulous Nuosu communities adorned the local monthly magazine, along with a series of articles on Yiwu (Yi affairs) in this particular locality. Later on, in the midst of the War of Resistance against Japan, Xikang became the subject of a special issue of the well-known pictorial Liangyou, including pictures by the famous photographer Zhuang Xueben (discussed in Chapter 3), who was also hired by Liu to carry out surveys in the region. In all these efforts the objective was the same: the visual performance of a modern practice of frontier administration and fieldwork that aimed to legitimize Han Chinese colonial expansion while at the same time instilling a sense of wonder and curiosity among a wider Han Chinese audience.