

Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier

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**Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier:
Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928-49
Hsiao-ting Lin**



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Preface

The main objective of this volume is to analyze a familiar yet relatively understudied subject of modern Chinese history: the Nationalist government's policies on China's ethnic borderlands and in particular its dealings with the Tibetan issue. In modern Chinese history, Nationalist China's ethnopolitics has more often been presumed than empirically investigated and rigorously documented. This is understandable, as original source materials that reveal the Han Nationalists vis-à-vis their minority and ethnic territorial issues have not been used by scholars. In recent years, with the declassification of Chinese archival materials from the Nationalist period (1928-49), especially the private papers of Chiang Kai-shek, scholars everywhere are now in a better position to examine the immediate background of ethnopolitical issues that still challenge today's People's Republic of China. This study, to a large extent, has benefited by the author's access to these newly available Chinese archival materials.

This book takes the Tibetan agenda as a case study that depicts modern China's pursuit of internal and external sovereignties. This important, complex issue became relevant to the new Chinese republican system right after the fall of Qing in 1912, and later became part of the Nationalist government's policy planning after 1928. This book takes a first step toward re-evaluating the intricate relationship between Nationalist China and Tibet. In a broader sense, it also shows how, during the divisive and chaotic period of modern China, Chinese territorial goals continued to change from a traditional empire to a modern polity, sometimes in unexpected and inadvertent ways.

The first two chapters provide background information on China's political and territorial landscape in the late 1920s and the early 1930s, as well as the frontier policy planning structure within the Nationalist governmental bureaucracy after 1928. They describe what really constituted the "Republic of China" at the early stage of Nationalist rule and how the Nationalist frontier agenda was understood in this broader political and institutional context. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission (MTAC)

was not just a minor governmental body of marginal significance. It provided a channel for officials at the Nationalist centre and authorities at the provincial border to deal with problems unrelated to Nationalist China's frontier affairs. In addition to the MTAC, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Waijiaobu) and military agencies of the Nationalist government also played influential roles in Nationalist China's ethnopolitical affairs. In the early Nationalist era, the fragmented and precarious frontier landscape was sophisticatedly used by both the Nationalists in Nanking and border provincial authorities to achieve their respective ends. For example, frontier and ethnopolitical issues were frequently manipulated by the Nationalists to achieve their state-building and regime-consolidation tasks. Moreover, after the Northern Expedition in 1928, the politically central but practically regional Nationalist government tried to create a new national image embodying the five main nationalities (the Han Chinese, Manchu, Mongols, Tibetans, and Hui Muslims). The civil wars in the early 1930s soon shattered the national image promoted by the Nationalists, but Chiang Kai-shek had nevertheless quite successfully persuaded ethnic minority groups in the remote outlying regions to believe that his new Nanking regime was in a better position than the previous warlord regimes to settle China's problematic frontier issues.

The three chapters in the second part of the book focus on Nationalist China's Tibetan issues in the prewar decade (1928–37). Previous works about Chinese-Tibetan relations have suggested that from 1928 on, the Nationalist government tried to reassert Chinese authority over Tibet. Considering that the Nationalists were unequivocally committed to national reunification, anti-imperialism, national dignity and salvation, and the promotion of a five-nationality Chinese Republic, it would be surprising to argue that they did not dream of a return to Tibet, over which they had been claiming full sovereignty. Yet these chapters argue that whether the Nationalist government, at the early stage of its rule, was really concerned that Tibet should unconditionally and uncompromisingly become an integrated part of China remains open to discussion. They also reconsider whether the Nationalists were genuinely anxious about losing Tibet, or even other outlying ethnic borderlands, when their regime faced crises such as political fragmentation and growing Japanese encroachment. No Nationalist official in the 1930s was bold enough to suggest that Nanking was too weak to implement an effective frontier policy, nor could such a person abandon the five-nationality Chinese Republic or renounce unrealistic authority over the border regions. But we must rethink whether, behind the political and ideological façade, the so-called “frontier policy” served political motives other than pure frontier and minority objectives. These chapters explore Sino-Tibetan relations in the context of Nationalist China's internal integration and state building, as well as the central government's process of consolidating power in the prewar decade, thus offering some new arguments regarding China's frontier and minority agenda in the first half of twentieth-century Chinese history.

The three chapters in the third part of the book focus on China's Tibetan agenda during the Sino-Japanese war (1937-45). The existing literature argues that the Japanese invasion of China, and the emergence of a group of powers allied with Nationalist China in its struggle against Japan, provided the Nationalists with an opportunity to advance their claims on the border regions and restore China's glorious past. Indeed Sino-Tibetan relations dramatically changed after Pearl Harbor. Once China became a member of the Great Four, the Nationalists began to talk about restoring their authority over the frontier territories. These works suggest that in the early 1940s, Chiang Kai-shek was even prepared to use military force to settle the Tibetan issue for good. Efforts by the Nationalists during wartime to assert their rights in the southwestern peripheries were justified by concerns for regime security and survival. These considerations were felt to be more important than the ideological contours of Chinese nationalism that originated in the Sun Yat-sen era.

In other words, China's so-called "positive policy" toward Tibet in the Second World War was an alternative that Chongqing had to adopt to ensure its survival. Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist associates took a pragmatic stand on Tibetan issues. There is a discrepancy between what can be learned from the superficially presented facts on which previous works and political stereotypes have relied and how policy makers of the wartime Nationalist government genuinely perceived and implemented their frontier agendas. From a long-term historical viewpoint, the Japanese invasion of China in 1937-45 provided the wartime Nationalist government in southwest China with an unwitting opportunity to revive China's state-building tasks in the southwest that had been suspended in 1911-12. By scrutinizing the Sino-Tibetan relationship in the context of international wartime rivalries in South and Inner Asia, these three chapters provide new interpretations for a better understanding of China's frontier and minority agendas in the 1930s and 1940s, and of the way in which present-day Chinese territoriality was conceptualized and formulated.

The last two chapters consider Nationalist China's postwar frontier imbroglio, and examine this issue in the broader context of postwar rivalry between the Han Chinese and non-Han minorities. The history of China from 1945 to 1949 has frequently been described as an *interregnum* because of the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. But there are other interesting and significant topics that remain unexplored. One overlooked topic is how the Nationalist government reformulated its frontier planning in the context of confrontations between the Han Chinese and various minority groups. In these chapters, the Nationalist government's postwar frontier agenda was dictated by events that threatened to redefine the very conception of *China*, and that shaped the territoriality of the present-day People's Republic of China. These chapters also provide insight into how the Chinese Nationalists, after defeating the Japanese, fumbled in vain with China's border restoration operations. The Nationalists intended to reinforce their postwar influence in the border regions just as calls increased for nationalism among

different non-Han ethnic communities, and as their demands for more political rights and economic resources were particularly strong. In addition, postwar China's Tibetan issues are discussed in the wider contexts of a Han Chinese versus non-Han milieu, and of the Nationalist government's state-building efforts in the southwest peripheries, undertaken in the wake of the Second World War.

Although it lasted only four years, the final stage of Nationalist rule in the Chinese mainland was crucial, at least in terms of China's frontier and minority issues. Hotly debated topics both within and beyond the present-day People's Republic of China, such as the problematic Tibetan agenda and the controversy surrounding the Eastern Turkestan movement for independence, cannot be separated from the territorial and ethnic legacies bequeathed by the Nationalist authorities half a century ago. This examination of postwar China's frontier agenda thus fills the lacunae in the existing scholarship and provides a better understanding of the origins of these ongoing questions.

Concerning the romanization of this work, most of the Chinese personal and place names are given in pinyin. Because of their familiarity to readers, however, some historical Wade-Giles names, such as Chiang Kai-shek, Sun Yat-sen, Peking, and Nanking, are retained.

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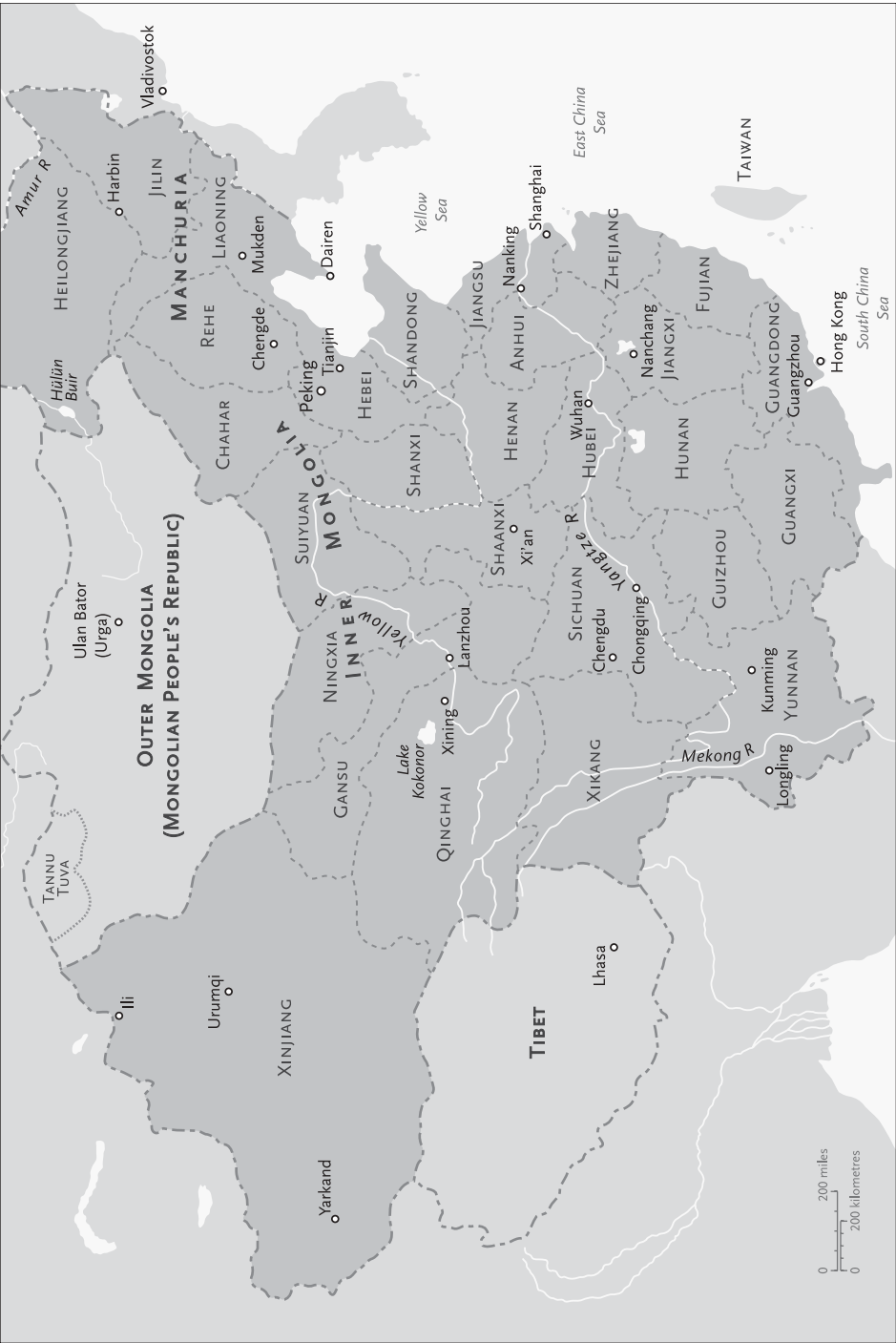
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Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier

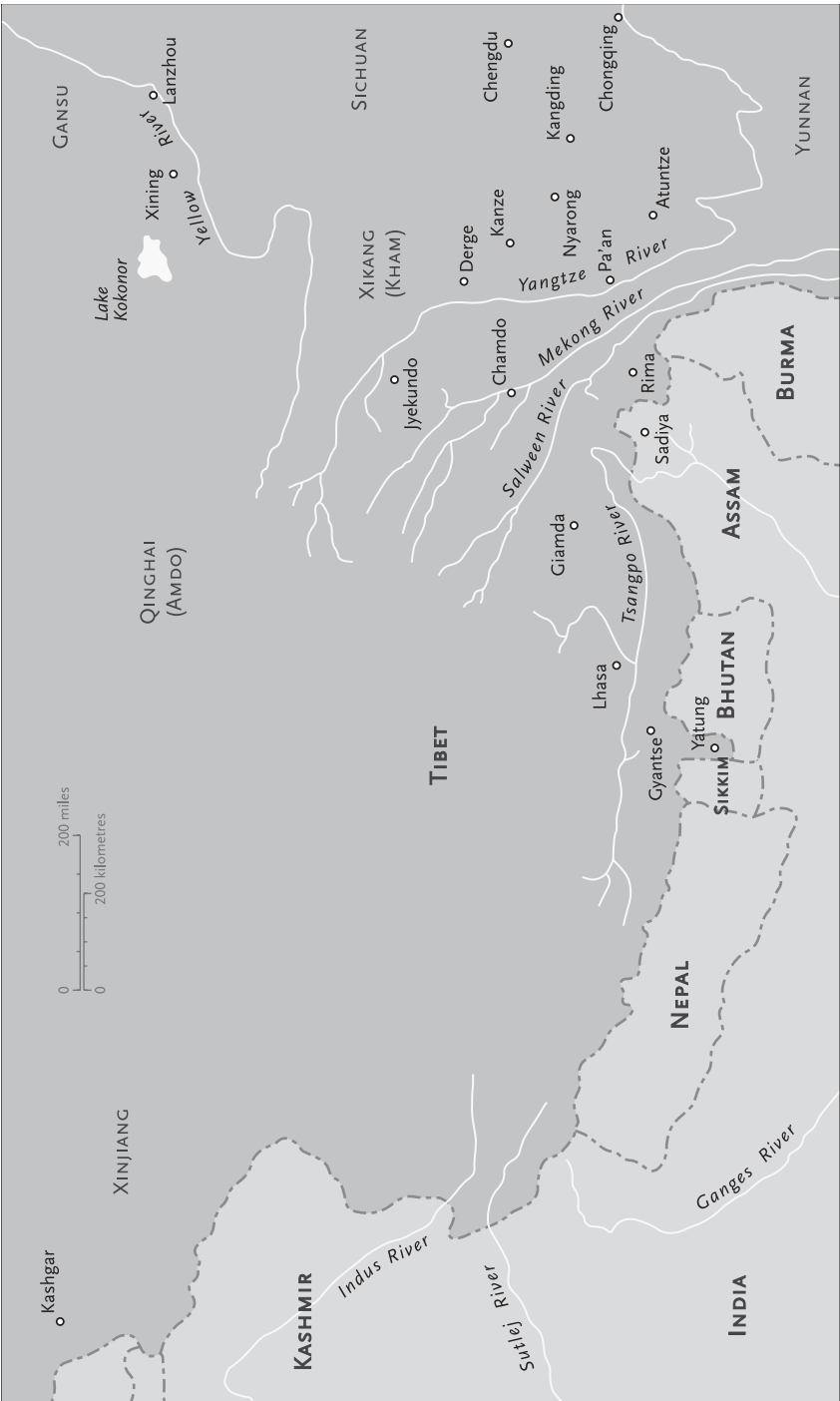
Prologue

Shen Zonglian, our former Representative to Tibet, has been teaching in Lynchburg College (VA) since the government retreated to Taiwan. He is both capable and reliable, with a good command of both Chinese and English, and he is able to use the Tibetan language. While I was serving as Foreign Minister I used to entrust him with matters of contacting the Dalai Lama's followers ... My opinion is that now we should secretly dispatch Shen to India, and make contact with [the Dalai Lama's brother] Gyalo Thundrup who is now in Kalimpong. After Shen has explored the whole situation more clearly in India, he may come to Taiwan to give you a firsthand report ... It is better that Shen should not come to Taiwan [before he goes to India], and for the time being his secret contact with us should be kept completely confidential ... In your future instructions I beg your Excellency to use "Mary" as nickname for Shen, "Li Da" for the Dalai Lama, and "Hua Sheng" for Gyalo Thundrup.¹

This recently declassified telegram was originally dispatched from Washington DC to Taipei by George K.C. Yeh, then the Republic of China's ambassador to the United States, ten days after the 14th Dalai Lama was exiled to India in March 1959. Four days later, Chiang Kai-shek approved Yeh's proposal, in a desperate attempt to gather the latest information about the astonishing revolt in Tibet, and to sound out the possibility of forming a coalition between the Dalai Lama's forces and his exiled government in Taipei.² This exchange of confidential dispatches provides insight into the extent of the clandestine activities that were under consideration and were possibly being carried out by Chiang Kai-shek and his advisors when the Tibetan issue unexpectedly came under the international spotlight. It further reminds us that, just two decades earlier on the mainland of China, it was Chiang Kai-shek's regime that had been the main player in the protracted and uneasy game of Sino-Tibetan relations. For more than two decades, Chiang's Nationalist government had had to grapple with the same issues that later confronted Mao



Nationalist China in the 1930s



Tibet and Southwest China

Zedong's Communist regime – issues that came to a head with the bloody pacification of the 1959 Tibetan revolt.

SINO-TIBETAN RELATIONS FROM MEDIEVAL TIMES TO LATE QING

Sino-Tibetan relations can be traced back as far as the seventh century AD, when the once mighty Tibetan empire was a constant source of menace to the Tang court.³ In the thirteenth century, when the Mongols ruled the Eurasian continent, Tibet, like other Inner Asian⁴ territories, also became a subjugated part of the Mongol empire. Yet Tibetan relations with the Mongols differed somewhat from those of the other conquered peoples in Eurasia. They were based on a special relationship called *Cho-Yon* (“patron-priest”), developed between the two nations. In 1254, Kublai accepted Phagspa, master of the Tibetan Sakya sect, as his religious mentor. This relationship required Kublai to accept the religious superiority of his teacher, and as a result, the status of Tibet, and the Sakya sect in particular, was elevated within the Mongolian Empire. As a “donation” to his spiritual tutor, Kublai granted Phagspa vast territories in Tibet proper, along with thirteen myriarchies of western and central Tibet. Five years later, when Kublai had himself officially proclaimed Great Khan of the Mongolian Empire and Emperor of the newly created Yuan dynasty (one of the four khanates of the empire), Phagspa was promoted to Imperial Preceptor. Kublai Khan and his successors all became the secular patrons of Tibetan Buddhism. The Cho-Yon relationship established between Phagspa and Kublai, which has no counterpart or equivalent in present-day international relations, was later to become the idealized form of Mongol-Tibetan as well as Sino-Tibetan relations.⁵

Here it is worthwhile to elaborate a bit more on the Cho-Yon relationship. Based on Tibetan sources, Shelkar Lingpa's work suggests that the religious and cultural relations between Tibetans and Mongols, “which initially were a relationship between the invaded and the invader, finally evolved into the relationship of priest and patron.”⁶ Yet Turrell Wylie's research indicates that the Cho-Yon relationship between the Yuan court and the Sakya sect was far more strained than subsequent historiographies have described. He argues that the establishment of the Cho-Yon relationship between Tibetans and Mongols should be understood not solely in a religious or cultural context, but from a wider perspective of the Mongols' strategic and military purposes at that time.⁷

During the Ming dynasty, the Mongols on the Inner Asian steppe were divided into eastern and western tribal alliances, while sectarian and regional rivalries continued to divide central Tibet. In 1570, initiating a shift in frontier policy, the Ming court granted tribute and trade privileges to the Eastern Mongols. This shift represented an abandonment of the Ming policy of active frontier defence in favour of the more passive policy of appeasement, and it also constituted a victory for Altan Khan, a powerful chief of the Eastern Mongols, whose control of access to the wealth of China allowed him to create

patronage relations not only among many Eastern Mongol tribes, but also with various Tibetan religious sects.⁸ In 1578, Altan Khan met Sonam Gyatso, the third incarnation of the Tibetan Yellow Hat (Gelugpa) abbot of Drepung, in Kokonor (otherwise known as Qinghai, or Amdo). In an exchange of political and spiritual legitimations, Sonam Gyatso identified himself as an incarnation of Phagspa and Altan as an incarnation of Kublai. With this mutual recognition, Altan was provided with a spiritual claim to the Chingghisid lineage, while Phagspa deftly secured Altan's political and military patronage for himself. Sonam Gyatso acquired from Altan Khan the name "Dalai" (meaning "ocean"), and thereafter became known as the 3rd Dalai Lama. Two abbots of Drepung Monastery were concurrently counted retrospectively as the first and second incarnations. From this time, Tibetan Buddhism began to spread rapidly among the Mongols.⁹

When Manchu forces penetrated as far as Kokonor in the mid-1640s, the Oirat Mongols who were then holding that area gradually submitted to the Manchus and began to send tribute. In 1648, an invitation was extended to the 5th Dalai Lama to visit the Manchu court at Peking. It was obvious that an alliance was in the interest of both parties: the Tibetan Yellow sect wished to revive the Cho-Yon relationship with the new dominant power in China and Inner Asia, and the Qing court, for its part, needed to use Tibetan Buddhism to strengthen its ties with the Mongols. In early 1653, the Dalai Lama reached Peking, where he had an audience with the Qing emperor Shunzhi (r. 1644-61) and was conferred with an honorific title.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, the relationship established by the 5th Dalai Lama's visit to Peking echoed the Cho-Yon relationship between Mongol China and Tibet. However, from a historical viewpoint, that the emperor was able to summon another political potentate to his court was unmistakably a sign of nominal submission on the part of the latter. Thus the establishment of the Cho-Yon relationship between the Yellow sect and the Manchu court has been interpreted by some as an indication of Tibet's subservience to China.¹¹

Indeed, with the consolidation of Qing control in China, and the decline of Mongol power in Inner Asia, the Qing court was able to intervene in Tibet without regard for Tibet's role in Inner Asian affairs. In 1714, the abbots of the three great monasteries of Tibet – Drepung, Sera, and Ganden – appealed to the Zungar Mongols to overthrow Lhazang Khan, the King of Tibet, who was a Hoshut Mongol. The Zungars agreed, and in November 1717 they attacked Lhasa and achieved an easy victory due to help from the monks inside the city. Lhazang Khan was soon killed, yet the arrival of the Zungars into Lhasa quickly became a disaster for the Tibetans, who realized that the Zungar Mongols were not only coming to depose Lhazang Khan, but also to loot their monasteries and homes. This event also led to the Qing dispatch of troops to expel the Zungars in 1720, which later evolved into a protracted confrontation between the Zungars and the Manchus in Inner Asia over the control of Tibet and the Dalai Lama.¹²

Generally speaking, from 1720 to the late eighteenth century, the Qing gradually increased its authority in Tibet, intervening in the case of third-party invasions of Tibet (1720 and 1792) and internal disorders (1728 and 1750). Each intervention resulted in an increase in Qing administrative control over Tibetan affairs. Two permanent Qing *ambans* (imperial residents) were officially installed in Lhasa in 1727 to closely superintend Tibetan affairs. This arrangement was reinforced by the presence of a Manchu garrison force in Tibet, which further suggested the strengthened military authority of the Qing in this Inner Asian dependency. In 1792, after successfully repelling the invading Gurkhas in Tibet, the Qing court took the occasion to extensively restructure the Qing protectorate over this territory. An imperial decree running to twenty-nine clauses was promulgated in that year, elevating the status of the ambans above that of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas.¹³ The ambans not only took control of Tibetan frontier defence and foreign affairs, but were also put in command of the Qing garrison and the Tibetan army. The Qing also required that the incarnations of the Panchen and Dalai Lamas be chosen with the supervision of the ambans.¹⁴ In effect, this meant that the final authority over the selection of reincarnations, and thus over political succession in the Tibetan system of combined spiritual and temporal rule, would henceforth belong to the Qing central government.

The measures put into effect in 1792 represented the height of Qing influence in Tibet. From this time on, the Qing dynasty became increasingly preoccupied with problems in the interior, and court officials in Peking found it less and less easy to intervene in Tibetan affairs. For instance, when the Gurkhas of Nepal again attacked Tibet in 1855 supposedly due to a trade dispute, the Qing was so preoccupied with the Taiping Rebellion that it was unable to respond to the Tibetans' request for assistance. Thus, the Dalai Lama was forced to pay tribute to Nepal and grant judicial extraterritoriality to Nepalese subjects in Tibet.¹⁵ As one scholar points out, by the second half of the nineteenth century, the Qing ambans, who represented the Qing emperor and Qing authority, could do little more than exercise ritualistic and symbolic influence. Their lack of actual administrative authority, as Li Tieh-tseng's work suggests, is revealed by a series of memorials to the court from the governor of Sichuan during the period 1876-85, in which the governor complains that the Tibetan administration was no longer subordinate to the Qing court.¹⁶

In 1895, Qing China suffered defeat in the war with Japan, thus beginning the final decline of the dynastic order. The final years of the dynasty witnessed the rise of Han Chinese nationalism, in reaction to both foreign imperialism and to the alien rule of the Manchu. Meanwhile, competition between the British and Russian empires over influence in Central Asia, usually romantically depicted as "The Great Game," began to transform Tibet, a geographically remote dependency of the Qing, into an object of international interest. In order to ward off any possible threat from the north and thus protect its position in India, the British government regarded it essential to maintain a sphere

of political and economic influence as well as a military buffer in Tibet. This resulted in a series of diplomatic and military manoeuvres initiated by the British toward Tibet, which were to continue into the early twentieth century.¹⁷ In 1904, in order to counteract growing Russian activity in Tibet, the government of India launched a military expedition to Tibet. Without encountering too much resistance, the British army entered Lhasa in August. As a result of this invasion, the British secured certain trade privileges and were allowed to open three trade marts at Gyantse, Yatung, and Gartok. In subsequent treaties the British further secured the guarantee that China would exclude all other foreign powers from Tibet, thus preventing Russian interference in this region.¹⁸

The British invasion of Tibet in 1904 had far-reaching implications in terms of the contemporary Tibetan agenda. It ended Tibet's century-long international isolation and exposed the myth of China's self-acclaimed authority in Tibet. It also established direct relations between the British and the Tibetans, upon which Tibet might theoretically have built a case for international recognition as an independent state. On the other hand, the growth of British interest and activity in Tibet inevitably caused the Chinese to attempt to restore their weakening position in Lhasa. In 1905, the Qing court initiated a series of new programs in the southwest with a view to consolidating central authority in this area. These projects included the elimination of local autonomous Tibetan chiefdoms in the Kham area (Eastern Tibet; later renamed Xikang) and the reduction of the number of monks in monasteries.¹⁹ The Qing court's new deals caused wide disaffection locally, and in one uprising led by monks, a Manchu amban was killed. In swift retaliation, the Qing government sent an army, under Zhao Erfeng, to suppress the rebellion and to reinforce its authority over Tibet. In the meantime, the Qing reforms in the southwest and the military advance into Tibet deeply shocked the 13th Dalai Lama, who had been in exile from his country since 1904 and was then en route back to Lhasa.²⁰ Frustrated that the Chinese troops were sent to Tibet to ensure China's control over him, in 1910 the Dalai Lama decided to flee into exile again, this time to India. The Chinese responded to his flight by deposing him. However, the Qing court in the 1900s was by no means comparable with the Qing in the eighteenth century. With the outbreak of the Chinese Revolution, Zhao Erfeng had to cease his proactive policies over Tibet. Taking advantage of the chaotic situation in China proper, the Tibetans demanded the withdrawal of all Chinese soldiers and officials from Tibet. Chinese troops were finally removed from Tibet, via India, at the end of 1912.²¹

TIBETAN ISSUES IN REPUBLICAN CHINA

With hindsight, the series of reforms launched by Zhao Erfeng in the final days of the Qing can be regarded as modern China's first state-building attempt in its southwest border regions. This effort was suspended as a result

of the collapse of the Qing court. What was perhaps more significant was that, with the ousting of Zhao Erfeng's troops, along with Chinese authority, from Tibet proper, the status of Tibet as part of China's frontier became a highly controversial issue that would remain, to all intents and purposes, unresolved throughout the subsequent Republican and Nationalist eras. After 1912, the Han Chinese continued to assert that their authority extended over the whole of Tibet, but the Lhasa authorities began to administer their own government and to formulate policy without reference to Chinese officials. As China became a republic, Sino-Tibetan relations entered a new, but still problematic, stage.

The new Chinese Republic was officially established on 1 January 1912, two months before the last Qing emperor finally abdicated. Immediately after its foundation, the Peking republican regime began to show interest, at least according to its official announcements, in transforming the Inner Asian dependencies of the defunct Qing into integral parts of the Chinese state. In response to the unstable frontier situation, President Yuan Shikai's officials propagated a doctrine of equality among the "five nationalities" of China – the Han, Manchu, Mongols, Tibetans, and Hui – the major component peoples of the former Qing empire. This five-nationality doctrine was premised upon the Han belief that border peoples only wanted equal treatment under a Chinese administration, not freedom from Chinese control altogether. Yet behind the political philosophy of such a five-nationality republic may have been a wish on the part of the new Chinese authorities to restore a collapsed frontier and ethnopolitical order, this time with Han Chinese at the centre.²² As far as Tibet was concerned, Peking hastily restored the rank and title of the exiled Dalai Lama, blaming the former Manchu regime and its ambans for the wrongdoings that had led to his flight. However, the Dalai Lama, who in 1912 returned to Lhasa with British Indian patronage, was no longer prepared to trust any Chinese promises or to accept Chinese authority over his territory. In a proclamation to Tibetans, he described the existing relationship between Tibet and China as that of patron and priest and declared that it was "not based on the subordination of one to the other."²³ Today, this statement is still regarded by many Tibetans as a Tibetan declaration of independence from China.

Not surprisingly, the way in which Han Chinese officials viewed the border regions did not reflect the views of non-Han Chinese inhabitants on the peripheries. In Outer Mongolia, Mongol nobles and princes declared independence in November 1911, with a reputed living Buddha (Bogd Khan) as head of the state. Between 1915 and 1921, due to a series of successful political and military manoeuvres by the Chinese government, Outer Mongolia was temporarily returned to China's political grasp. However, at no time were Yuan Shikai and his successors in Peking able to restore even partial Chinese authority in Tibet in the same way. As is well known, in 1913-14 when the

British proposed that a tripartite conference on Tibet's status be held in India at Simla, the Chinese government was, indeed, forced to accept the participation of Tibetan delegates at the international conference on an equal footing.²⁴ But no consensus concerning Tibet's status was reached at the conference. The Tibetans claimed independence from Chinese authority, whereas the Chinese uncompromisingly insisted on maintaining China's sovereignty over Tibet. Not only did the dispute concerning Tibet's status remain unresolved, but no effective agreement was reached regarding more pragmatic matters, such as the demarcation of a Sino-Tibetan border. Finally the British intervened and proposed a plan for an Inner and Outer Tibet under different degrees of Chinese and Tibetan control. The Tibetans tentatively agreed, but at the last minute the Chinese government repudiated this agreement, despite the Chinese delegate at Simla already having initialled the draft version of the convention.²⁵

The failure to reach an agreed and definite Sino-Tibetan boundary at Simla to a large extent contributed to the border war in 1917-18 between the Tibetan army and the Chinese garrison stationed at Chamdo. Claiming that the whole Kham area was part of their territory, the Tibetans not only drove the Chinese armies back east of the upper Yangtze River (Gold Sand River), but also further sought to take all of the western part of Kham. At this point, the British again stepped in and negotiated a truce, with the result that the upper Yangtze River became the *de facto* Sino-Tibetan boundary, until the early 1950s when the People's Liberation Army crossed the river and "liberated" Tibet.²⁶ After the armed border conflict, in 1920, a Gansu provincial mission was dispatched to Lhasa by the Chinese central authorities, presumably with a view to improving the frosty relations with Tibet, but the Chinese officials achieved little more than the privilege of stepping onto Tibetan soil for the first time since 1912.²⁷ In contrast to the deteriorating Sino-Tibetan relationship, Anglo-Tibetan relations in the early 1920s reached a new height. From 1920 on, the Dalai Lama carried out a series of reforms in order to modernize his country, and the ruling class of Tibet relied heavily on the British both financially and technically. During this period, against a backcloth of British patronage, a relatively weak Chinese central regime, and a chaotic situation in China proper, the Tibetans were able to enjoy an independent status free from Chinese dominance, even if such independence was *de facto*, not *de jure*.

THE CHINESE NATIONALIST REGIME AND ITS TIBETAN AGENDA

The Nationalist government, a reincarnation of Sun Yat-sen's southern local regime in Canton, was officially proclaimed in July 1925. Within three years, the Nationalist Revolutionary Army, under Chiang Kai-shek's leadership, had defeated several warlords in south and central China. When the Nationalist troops captured Peking in the summer of 1928, the Nationalist government

formally declared the reunification of China, thereby ushering in the new Nationalist era of China. Since its first emergence, the Nationalist regime had had grand ambitions, and it was determined to look different from other so-called “warlord regimes.” In their propaganda, the Nationalists made it clear that they not only sought to defend the far-flung borders that the Chinese Republic had inherited from the Manchu empire but also intended to reunify the whole nation and to defend its sovereignty. With a view to achieving this grandiose goal, a revolutionary political construct, or as William Kirby suggested, the “party-state,” emerged for the first time in China’s long political history.²⁸

Nevertheless, viewed from a wider perspective, Chiang Kai-shek and his revolutionary companions could not have adopted a less nationalistic approach to China’s frontier affairs than their allegedly backward predecessors in Peking, for the Nationalist government’s legitimacy as the successors to Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary movement rested on the assertion that they would eventually eliminate China’s humiliating status and restore China’s glorious past. In addition, public opinion in the 1920s and early 1930s also played an influential role in shaping the new Nationalist government’s professed policy toward China’s peripheries. The frustration and anger aroused by the return of territorial rights in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the subsequent May Fourth Movement remained a collective memory for most Han Chinese intellectuals, including some sinicized Manchu. From the early stages of the Nationalist era, public opinion could be heard from time to time urging the government to implement a nationalistic and revolutionary frontier policy. Influential mass media in China proper also prompted the new Nationalist regime in Nanking to take a more positive stance on China’s traditional border territories.²⁹ Consequently, any modern Chinese regime that failed to insist upon China’s territorial and sovereign rights would probably have found it difficult to win widespread support.

It therefore came as no surprise that, from the outset, the Nationalist government constantly reiterated its claim to the “lost” outlying territories, such as Outer Mongolia and Tibet, and asserted that those territories were an inseparable part of Republican Chinese territory. The high-sounding “five-nationality republic,” promoted unanimously by Sun Yat-sen and the Peking warlord regimes, became the ideal goal for the new authorities in Nanking, and in reference to frontier and minority affairs, the higher echelons of the KMT (Kuomintang – the Nationalist Party) repeatedly reinforced revolutionary and nationalist ideas in its official propaganda as well as in party guidelines.³⁰ The creation of a nationalist image and the promise to implement a revolutionary policy in foreign and frontier affairs were essential if the KMT Nationalists were to convince Han Chinese public opinion of the 1930s and 1940s that their government was the only way for a weak and humiliated China to become a great power. As far as Tibet was concerned, as one scholar recently stated, the rise of Chinese nationalism and the formation of the Nationalist regime in 1928

also ended an era in which tripartite (Chinese, British, and Tibetan) international negotiations over the status of Tibet might have been possible.³¹

In retrospect, therefore, it can be seen that right from the outset the KMT was endeavouring to construct a five-nationality ethnopolitical order and to create a Han-centred nation-state of China with the Tibetans included. However, it should be emphasized that government declarations and official promises by no means constituted the reality of the Sino-Tibetan political scenario. Neither should it be assumed that Chiang Kai-shek's asserted revolutionary policies about China's frontier and minority affairs reflected what he and his regime genuinely intended to achieve, particularly in the context of their state-building tasks and the construction of regime prestige.³² As I will elaborate further, the Nationalist regime's claimed sovereignty over the vast frontier territories, far beyond its substantial control, was based on a sort of political imagination that was engineered to maintain its Nationalist facade and political legitimacy. In reality, however, the practice of Nationalist China's relations with Tibet and other frontier regions was often deliberately clouded in ambiguity and political calculation.

When taking into consideration the consolidation of regime authority and the building of governmental prestige in the peripheries, it is also apparent that at different stages of KMT rule, different concerns shaped how Chiang Kai-shek and his top officials perceived their Tibetan agenda. Thus, for a regime that was eagerly seeking to extend its authority from the lower Yangtze delta to other parts of Chinese territory (1928-57), control of Tibet was viewed by calculating strategists in Nanking as something other than a remote and impracticable item on the agenda. For a regime that was desperately endeavouring to survive the invasion of their Japanese enemy (1938-45), wartime interactions with Tibet and other Inner Asian peripheries reveal how the Chinese Nationalists really perceived their frontier agendas, exposing the gap between their alleged policies at the highest level and their real political scenarios. And for a regime that eventually won the war and inevitably had to face the challenge of postwar China's territorial and administrative design (1945-49), dealing with a Tibetan agenda clearly became a problematic yet unavoidable issue that is closely linked to, and has had a profound impact upon, the present-day dispute surrounding Tibet.

It is also significant that, after the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the Han Chinese people's concept of "frontier" was gradually shifted by a changing political and social milieu. The Sino-Japanese war drove both Nationalist China's centre of gravity and a huge number of Han Chinese people into the far southwestern corner; dealing with frontier peoples became a necessity, not an alternative, for the uprooted central government and the southwest-fleeing refugees. During wartime, systematic government-sponsored survey activities into the remotest tribal regions of Kokonor, Kham, and other western borderlands were undertaken. In the meantime, there was no shortage of voices from both government officials and intellectuals urging that particular attention

henceforth be paid to the overall condition of the southwest, since this region was no longer a distant “frontier wasteland” that could be simply disregarded, as was often the case prior to the war.⁵³ Equally significant was that, after 1937, the war-besieged KMT regime was obliged to substantiate its imaginary authority in the southwestern borderlands, and to transform the ill-demarcated “frontiers” into a legally defined “boundary.” This transformation process was by no means an easy one. As this study will demonstrate, as late as the mid-1940s, China’s territory in Inner Asia and the southwestern districts was disputed. The main cause of this territorial dispute, and of the situations in Outer Mongolia and Manchuria, was the intriguing international politics during and immediately after the Second World War. Yet in Tibet and southwest China, the maintenance of an ambiguous and undefined national boundary was in the interest of the war-ridden Nationalist strategists, who prioritized wartime military defence and regime security over resolution of China’s territorial issues in these areas. During the divisive and chaotic period of Nationalist China, Chinese territorial goals continued to change, sometimes in unexpected and inadvertent ways, from the creation of a traditional empire to a modern nation-state.

THE LINGERING TERRITORIAL AND ETHNOPOLITICAL LEGACY

It should be stressed once again that most of the contemporary controversies surrounding the Sino-Tibetan relationship are legacies handed down from the 13th Dalai Lama and Chiang Kai-shek to their successors, the exiled 14th Dalai Lama and the Beijing Communist authorities, who are still playing the Sino-Tibetan game today. The dispute over Tibet’s political status, the Tibetan call for autonomy or independence, and the emergence of two Panchen Lamas cannot be separated from China’s relations with Tibet in the early twentieth century. It is therefore impossible to better understand these hotly debated issues without first analyzing how the Sino-Tibetan relationship was shaped in the pre-Communist era. In light of contemporary China’s ethnic and border studies, it is also important to understand how the sensitive territorial and minority agendas were perceived in the nationalist milieu of the early twentieth century, for it is a milieu, albeit a different one, that undeniably still dominates Chinese society today.

Nevertheless, this book does not intend to produce a paradigmatic Sino-Tibetan political history, chronicling political events in the relations between Nanking/Chongqing and Lhasa during the whole of the Nationalist period. Neither does this book try to offer an ultimate answer, whereby the two disputing nations get out of a complicated dilemma. Instead, the main focus will be on revealing how an originally weak, power-limited Han nationalist regime played ethnopollitical games, utilizing the Tibetan agenda as a means to elevate its prestige, to reinforce its authority, and to initiate its state-building projects, from China proper to the Inner Asian border regions. Meanwhile, this

research further seeks to demonstrate how the Nationalists, when faced with incessant Japanese military encroachments from the east, gradually substantiated their “imagined sovereignty” in frontier China and attempted to transform the nebulously defined Inner Asian peripheries into boundary-fixed borderlands. This analysis of frontier-boundary transformation is of great significance, particularly because the processes by which this expansion of power took place are largely responsible for the shape of present-day China’s territoriality. Instead of the conventional “Han Chinese versus Tibetans” analytical framework, I place the entire Tibetan issue in the context of the KMT’s state-building endeavours on the Inner Asian peripheries. The result of this approach will be a reappraisal of previous frameworks used by scholars to interpret Han Chinese perceptions of frontier and minority agendas.

In 1929, soon after the Nationalist government became the new master in China’s political arena, Chiang Kai-shek and the 13th Dalai Lama made contact with each other for the first time. The establishment of closer links between Lhasa and Nanking marked the end of a suspended relationship that had endured for nearly two decades between China and Tibet, and that is where this book begins. Yet before entering into a detailed discussion of the Sino-Tibetan relationship, Han Chinese perceptions of the border issues, and their minority agendas during the Nationalist period, it is useful first to elaborate on what the “Republic of China” really meant in the late 1920s and early 1930s and what China’s frontier agenda looked like within this conceptual framework.

Part 1: The Setting

A Localized Regime, National Image, and Territorial Fragmentation

China has long lacked a sound national defence, and how China's frontier policy should be made has long been neglected. Now that the north and the south [of China] are reunified again, and there is evident progress in the political situation, we see that powerful figures in political and military circles are giving more consideration to the aforementioned issues. This is a pleasing and welcome development ... As the frontier agenda has attracted much attention and has become a fashionable focus, we sincerely hope that both government officials and reputed figures of our society will take warning from the pages of history, and endeavour to research our frontier problems with particular care. This would be a greatest blessing for the frontier regions and peoples, and would be of vital and lasting importance for the welfare of our own country.¹

By the time the influential *Da Gong Bao* (Tianjin) published this editorial in December 1928, China's political scenario indeed looked prudently sanguine. After the completion of Chiang Kai-shek's Northern Expedition and the subsequent submission of Manchuria by its ruler, the Young Marshal Zhang Xueliang, to the new Nationalist regime in Nanking, the division of China's political landscape, in effect since Yuan Shikai's death in 1916, also came to an end. Now, apart from Tibet and Outer Mongolia, China once again had a commonly recognized central government, which was under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek; toward the end of 1928, he was vigorously planning his next grand campaign – to launch a large-scale, nationwide disarmament program aimed at eliminating the regionalism and warlordism that was deemed so detrimental to China's unity and peace.² The new Nationalist government and its leaders also claimed that, after the military consolidation of the nation, China had entered a new period that they termed “tutelage” (*xunzheng*). A nationwide conference was also being organized, which would be attended by different factions and representatives from all over the country with a view to establishing a political and economic structure that would consolidate this achievement.³

The new political developments in China proper inevitably led many people in the late 1920s to reflect upon how the new Nationalist power holders in Nanking might face China's precarious and unresolved frontier issues. Indeed, in this respect, the KMT regime seemed to display a revolutionary spirit that was momentarily refreshing and promising to the mass media. Immediately after the Northern Expedition, Nanking declared the inauguration of six new provinces in Inner Mongolia, Kokonor, and southwest China (i.e., Chahar, Rehe, Suiyuan, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xikang). In Nationalist China's newly proposed military scheme, these freshly created border provinces were all included in Nanking's national defence system. Separate arrangements for the garrisoning of even the remote Tibetan and Outer Mongolian territories were also under serious consideration.⁴

The Nationalist government's highly politically symbolic proposal of transforming these former Qing outlying dependencies or special territories into part of China proper, as well as including these border regions in Nanking's military and security orbit, at that time was interpreted as having clearly demonstrated Chiang Kai-shek's resolve to bring the "lost" frontier regions closer into Nationalist China's political and administrative yoke.⁵ In addition, at various public events, the KMT revolutionaries indefatigably pledged their determination to strengthen the new regime's links with various non-Han Chinese minority groups on the periphery, and promised to implement a series of new programs with a view to improving the welfare of the border communities. Indeed, with a seemingly unified national image and a new central government, mass opinion in late 1928 had plenty of reason to believe that the Nationalists were revolutionary and progressive and were surely distinct from their so-called "corrupt" and "incapable" predecessors of the warlord era. Clearly, this impression led people to believe that Chiang Kai-shek and his revolutionaries were in a more advantageous position than any others to restore the lost central authority in China's far-flung borderlands.

NATIONALIST CHINA'S TERRITORIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Was the *Da Gong Bao* being too optimistic about Nationalist China's frontier prospects? Since the 1911 Revolution, attempts made by Yuan Shikai's new Chinese Republic to transform the Inner Asian possessions of the former Qing empire into integral parts of the Chinese state had been seriously challenged by the non-Han minorities, who after the collapse of the old dynastic order regarded themselves as no longer being under an obligation of loyalty to a Han regime. Despite its pretensions to authority over the vast dependencies of the defunct Qing court, the Chinese Republican government in Peking found itself in an extremely weak position on its Inner Asian borderlands.⁶ Following the 1911 Revolution, the most precarious frontier crises confronting the Peking authorities were their arduous negotiations with two of the most powerful titans in the world at that time, the Russians and British, over the

political status of Outer Mongolia and Tibet respectively.⁷ In dealing with these world powers and attempting to secure China's traditional rights in the borderlands, Yuan Shikai's new regime had little muscle. For instance, when faced with the Russian pressure, Peking was obliged to give its northern neighbour huge trade, tax, and mineral privileges in Outer Mongolia. In return, Republican China only secured from the Tsar a vaguely defined suzerainty over this vast frontier territory.⁸ Because the Chinese government possessed little physical presence in the outlying regions and Chinese sovereignty over these territories was fragile, from a Han Chinese-centred perspective, the frontier issue looked extremely problematic.

The coming to power of the KMT Nationalists did not change the political status quo; the impression given was simply one of another weak Han Chinese central regime that claimed authority over an uncontrollable, fragmented, but conceptually extant China. How did the Nationalists actually view the issue of China's territoriality and seek to craft a clear national image? When the KMT established its new political base in Nanking, it was basically a weak, fractured entity still struggling with unresolved questions regarding its own identity.⁹ In order to consolidate the legitimacy of their rule in China, officials in Nanking found it necessary to promote, at least in their official propaganda and pronouncements, the ideology of Sun Yat-sen as representing the moral and ideological underpinning of their rule. Consequently, with reference to the issue of national unity and territorial integrity, a doctrine of equality among the five nationalities of China – the Han Chinese, Manchu, Mongols, Tibetans, and Hui Muslims – that had been advocated in Sun's Nationalism of the Three People's Principles was uncompromisingly insisted upon. From a more practical perspective, given that previous Peking warlord regimes had never seen fit to surrender their equally weak authority over all the old imperial Chinese territories, no official of the KMT regime, which regularly asserted its right to be considered the legitimate heir to the Nationalist movement, could risk renouncing any territorial rights. The ideal of a five-race national image was converted into a political and legal territorial commitment, following the example of previous regimes in Peking. In June 1931, the Provisional Constitution was promulgated in Nanking, pointedly including all the provinces and the *de facto* independent regions of Outer Mongolia and Tibet as part of the territory of the Republic of China. In the proposed official constitution of 1934, the further assertion was added that no alteration should be made to this territory.¹⁰

The KMT Nationalists' claim to sovereignty by no means equated to effective domination. Neither did such a claim indicate that Nanking was capable of launching state-building tasks to integrate the border areas into the Nationalist yoke in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when this trouble-ridden infant regime was having difficulties even controlling regions in China proper. However, since the Nationalists had been continuously using their propaganda to attack the past failure of the Manchus and the warlord regimes to

implement a sound frontier and minority policy in order to secure national integrity, the KMT was now in a winning position vis-à-vis its frontier and territorial issues; previous regimes were to be blamed for the precarious conditions that currently existed in the border regions, whereas any achievement in frontier affairs made thereafter would be credited to the new government in Nanking.¹¹

A similar notion may have lain behind KMT reaction to the Mukden incident in September 1931. The Japanese invasion of northeast China and the creation of a puppet regime in Manchuria in the spring of 1932 represented a great loss of China's frontier territory and the breakup of an integrated national image. Nonetheless, despite making diplomatic efforts, Nanking did not contemplate launching a serious military effort in order to maintain its territorial integrity in the northeast.¹² On the contrary, Chiang Kai-shek did his best to postpone direct confrontation with the Japanese and insisted upon pursuing a policy of "pacifying the interior enemies before fighting a strong foreign foe" (*an'nei rangwai*).¹³ From Nanking's point of view, consolidating its still-unstable power in China proper was a far more urgent and pragmatic concern than risking a war to recover an area that had never been and was unlikely to come under its immediate administrative sway.¹⁴

DECONSTRUCTING NATIONALIST CHINA

To obtain a clear idea of how the KMT regime in the prewar decade really perceived China's frontier agenda and the concept of territorial integrity, it is necessary first to deconstruct what really constituted the "Republic of China" in the early Nationalist era. In retrospect, the Northern Expedition launched by Chiang Kai-shek and formally completed in 1928 did not achieve its major aim: the unification of China under a nationalistic central government through the elimination of the warlords' power.¹⁵ On the contrary, during the Northern Expedition provincial warlords were permitted to join the KMT and remain in command of their troops. The combination of continued threats from within and the extraordinarily hostile international environment in the late 1920s led Nanking to accept and give nominal authority to virtually all those who did not openly oppose the new government.¹⁶

It was not surprising, therefore, that when the dust settled after the Northern Expedition, China remained politically and militarily fragmented. Five major military factions each controlled a cluster of provinces, and half a dozen or more provinces stood alone, not part of any group but not effectively under central government authority either. Chiang Kai-shek's so-called central government controlled the lower Yangtze Valley, including Nanking and the great financial centre of Shanghai. Feng Yuxiang, who by 1928 had his National People's Army (Guominjun) firmly in control, exercised strong influence in Henan, Chahar, Suiyuan, Shaanxi, and part of Gansu.¹⁷ Another powerful military leader in north China was Yan Xishan. After the inauguration of

the new central regime in Nanking, Yan continued to rule his old province of Shanxi undisturbed, largely because of the province's geographical isolation. By the late 1920s, Yan's influence was also predominant in Hebei and part of Suiyuan, where he resolutely resisted the possible extension into his sphere of effective control by Chiang Kai-shek's government.¹⁸

In Manchuria, in late 1928, the Young Marshal Zhang Xueliang still dominated the three provinces of the northeast freely and independently, despite declaring his nominal allegiance to the Nationalist government and his willingness to turn the management of the region's foreign relations over to Nanking.¹⁹ In southwest China, the Guangxi faction, led by Li Zongren and Bai Chongxi, ruled Guangxi and had a strong influence in Guangdong, although by 1929 they generally accepted Nanking authority in matters of national scope. As a matter of fact, through the first half of the 1930s, Guangxi remained essentially independent, and, as Sheridan argues, Li Zongren and his clique were remarkably successful in the administration and development of their province.²⁰

The semi-independent provinces that were not part of large spheres were in the southwest and northwest. From the beginning of the warlord period following Yuan Shikai's death, Sichuan had been divided into a number of virtually autonomous regions, called "garrison districts" (*fanganqu*). Each area was dominated by a warlord, and year after year half a dozen or so warlords of comparable strength vied with one another for control of the various regions. Their incessant fighting created a situation of extreme disorder and confusion, and the end of the Northern Expedition hardly created a pause in these internecine struggles.²¹ Yunnan had been operating autonomously since 1911, maintaining only tenuous connections with the central government largely as a result of the province's isolated position and the strong local sentiment of its populace, one-half of which was non-Han Chinese. By the end of 1928, warlords in both Sichuan and Yunnan ostensibly accepted the authority of Chiang Kai-shek's new KMT regime, but before the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Nanking's influence in the two southwestern provinces was essentially nonexistent. In Yunnan, the warlord regime under Long Yun, a sinicized Yi, maintained its own army and a separate currency long after acknowledging Nanking central government legitimacy. Long's sophisticated political skill allowed him to keep his remote province beyond Nationalist control until the end of the Sino-Japanese war in 1945, when Chiang Kai-shek's troops eventually seized him and sent the Yunnanese army out of the province.²² In Sichuan, according to one academic study, by the early 1930s the only agencies of the central government that functioned were the Post and Telegraph Administration, the Maritime Customs Service, the Salt Inspectorate, and a branch of the Bank of China. The Maritime Customs revenues, obtained under foreign supervision, were the only monies collected in the province that found their way to Nanking.²³

The northwestern provinces of Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai were linked both by their geographical proximity and because they had a substantial

Muslim minority. Politically and militarily, these regions had been dominated by the local Muslim family named Ma since the late nineteenth century. When Zuo Zongtang pacified the northwest in the late 1870s, he reached an agreement with the local Ma family members and appointed one of them as Governor of Shaanxi and Gansu. Subsequently, the Ma family achieved dominance in the border regions of Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai and started what was, in effect, a small dynasty of its own. From the beginning of the Republican era until the end of the 1920s, the brothers Ma Qi and Ma Lin ruled Gansu Corridor and Qinghai, followed in the 1930s by Ma Qi's sons, Ma Bufang and Ma Buqing. Another branch of the Ma family rose to power in Ningxia and southern Gansu. Ma Hongbin built his own power base in Gansu in the 1920s, and in the early 1930s he became governor of Gansu. At the same time, his cousin Ma Hongkui became governor of Ningxia, where he ruled for the following decade and a half.²⁴

The Chinese province least integrated into the national whole was Xinjiang, a vast, remote, and sparsely populated region that had periodically been part of the Han and non-Han empires occupying China at various times since the Former Han Dynasty (202 BC-AD 9). It was not until 1884, however, that Xinjiang became an official province of China. It was ethnically and culturally distinct, with a large majority of non-Han peoples, most of whom were Muslims. Xinjiang's distance from the chief centres of Chinese power and culture, plus the obstacles to communication and transportation, made it extremely difficult for leaders of China to bind it to the rest of the country. Between 1912 and 1928, Xinjiang was under the administration of Yang Zengxin, who acknowledged the authority of the Peking Republican government, but to all intents and purposes paid no attention to it. Yang was assassinated by his subordinates in 1928, just a month after the Nationalist army entered Peking. His unpopular successor, Jin Shuren, was both more corrupt and less efficient than Yang, and the provincial government under Jin was even less concerned with obeying the new Nationalist central government. Jin alienated virtually every important group in the province, and, in the spring of 1933, he was toppled from power by a Muslim jihad led by Ma Zhongying, a member of the same Ma family that dominated a large part of Chinese Inner Asia.²⁵

After Jin Shuren fled from the Xinjiang provincial capital of Urumqi (Tihwa) in 1933, the strongest militarist in the province, Sheng Shicai, seized power, and Nanking later confirmed him as the new leader of Xinjiang. But Sheng, who was born in Manchuria, also had little to do with Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT. Instead, he adopted a policy of close rapport with Soviet Russia, which in terms of economic importance and communications facilities was closer than the heartland of China. The Soviets provided Sheng's regime with various kinds of technical aid and, on more than one occasion, with military support against Sheng's Muslim rebels in Central Asia. Sheng ruled this vast territory with high-handed independence from 1933 to the early 1940s, and,

like Yang Zengxin and Jin Shuren before him, gave little more than nominal allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist government.²⁶

Mongolia and Tibet, two regions over which Nanking in the 1931 constitution also claimed full sovereignty, had been operating largely free of Han Chinese dominance since the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The semi-independent provincial warlords had recognized the existence of Nanking as China's new central regime, quite often deliberately ignoring it, but after 1928 these two political entities never gave even nominal allegiance to the Nationalist government. In the northern part of what was known as Outer Mongolia, most Han Chinese were driven out or killed during the tumultuous period of 1911-12, and the area declared independence from the ailing Qing court in December 1911, with the reputed Yellow Hat sect prelate, the 8th Jebtsundamba Hutuktu (Bogd Khan), as its head of state. In 1915, Outer Mongolia lost its independence and was made an autonomous state of Republican China; in 1918 that autonomy was abolished, and Outer Mongolia temporarily returned to Chinese sovereignty. In 1919, the White Russians drove the Chinese out of Outer Mongolia, and the Bolsheviks who defeated the White Russians in 1921 backed the Mongols' claim to nationhood. Thus supported, the new Mongolian People's Republic (MPR) was officially proclaimed in 1924 and was able to withstand Chinese pressure. The MPR became a socialist state, and its government took an anti-religious direction that was heavily influenced by the Soviet Union.²⁷

On the other hand, the situation developed rather differently in Inner Mongolia. Since the late Qing period, railway construction, both in Manchuria and northern China, had led to an influx of Han agricultural settlers who steadily dispossessed the Inner Mongols of their best grazing lands. Political and economic influence was combined in the persons of the local Chinese officials, who were heavily interested in the land deals attending the colonization movement. The crowning blow came in 1928, when the Nationalist government divided the central part of Inner Mongolia into the four new provinces of Rehe (Jehol), Chahar, Suiyuan, and Ningxia. Other Mongol regions were incorporated into Gansu, Ningxia, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, and Jilin provinces (which combined to form today's Inner Mongolia in 1956, when Alashan was integrated into the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region). The newly established provincial boundary lines cut ruthlessly across the traditional Mongol tribal and league or banner boundaries, contributing further to the Mongols' disunity and facilitating their ultimate colonization by the Han Chinese.²⁸

The political status of Tibet and its relationship with Republican China remain controversial issues, concerning which recent scholarship has expressed diverse opinions. As Melvyn Goldstein points out clearly, the pro-Tibetan faction argues that Tibet was an independent state conquered by the Chinese Communists and was wrongly incorporated into the Chinese state. The pro-Chinese faction, on the other hand, sees Tibet as a traditional part of China, only splitting from it after the fall of the Qing dynasty as a result of

machinations by the “British imperialists.”²⁹ Yet whatever one’s perspective, it is undeniable that after 1911 the former Qing officials and the imperial troops were entirely expelled, and Chinese authority was reduced to a minimum. Consequently, Tibet had gained *de facto* independence from China’s jurisdiction, with its own particular political-religious dual governmental system. It is also crystal clear that the failure of the Simla conference of 1913–14 produced a vexing problem: the Lhasa government and the Peking authorities were unable to reach an agreement on a fixed and mutually agreed boundary between Tibet and southwest China. In the Nationalist era that followed, this lack of a clearly defined border was intricately bound up in the clash between the Tibetans and the Chinese warlord regimes in the southwest over local interests, power consolidation, and tax collection.³⁰

Concerning Sino-Tibetan relations in the modern period, Goldstein has once again rightly reminded us of the discrepancy between “political Tibet” and “ethnographic Tibet.” The former area is equivalent to the polity ruled by the Dalai Lama in modern times, whereas the latter corresponds to the borderland areas occupied by various traditional Tibetan tribal states in present-day Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.³¹ I further suggest that the KMT Nationalists’ perception of and strategy concerning China’s Tibetan agenda evolved according to different stages of their rule in China. In the process of this evolution, external factors – chiefly the Japanese invasion of China – played a particularly crucial role in shaping the top KMT leadership’s perceptions of Nationalist China’s territoriality in Tibet. Yet in retrospect, whether high officials in Nanking in the late 1920s and early 1930s were truly in possession of a clear and accurate political picture of the remote southwestern Chinese borderlands remains open to speculation.

Apart from the autonomous provincial regimes and the *de facto* independent regions of MPR and Tibet, there were dozens of territorially based “informal” kingdoms ruled by non-Han leaders within the theoretical Chinese national boundary. These realms, disguised in various political and administrative facades, were operating beyond the effective jurisdiction of Nanking. In the northern steppe beyond the Great Wall, from the Hülün Buir district on the Mongolian-Manchurian border to the Alashan and Ordos territories in the Gobi Desert, all the way west to the Altai district on the Xinjiang-Outer Mongolia fringe, numerous hereditary Mongol princes continued to rule their own political machinery identified as “leagues” (*chigolgangs*) or “banners” (*khoshinghun*), traditional socio-political structures, the origins of which dated back to the early Qing period. After the KMT Nationalists came to power, they officially proclaimed that these old imperial legacies should be gradually abolished and the leagues and banners be reorganized into the new provincial and county system. Yet Nanking’s lack of substantial authority on the frontiers meant that the proclamation existed in name only.³²

The Mongols were not the only ones who, with officially recognized hereditary titles, were able to keep their traditional realms intact within

Nationalist China's national boundary. In eastern Xinjiang, the story of local Turkic hereditary nobles of the oases of Hami (Kumul) and Turfan was another prominent example. It shows that, apart from Tibetans and Mongols, Muslim ethnic minority leaders in Chinese Inner Asia were also in a position to dominate their own khanates freely and independently from the distant Nanking centre or the provincial authorities in Urumqi. By 1929, Khan Maqsud Shah, ruler of Hami, was already an old man on his sickbed. Yet his reputation and long governance since the Qing era had allowed him to enjoy strong influence in northwest China, where he was nicknamed "The King of the Gobi."⁵³ Before he died in 1930, Khan Maqsud Shah entrusted his tiny khanate to his able court chancellor, Yulbas Khan, who, together with the khan of Turfan, Emin-khwaja, was desperately endeavouring to survive the increasingly heavy Han Chinese pressure to bring their oasis kingdoms under the complete control of the provincial authorities in Urumqi. In 1931, Xinjiang Governor Jin Shuren eventually announced the abolition of the hereditary leadership of Hami khanate, an announcement that led to an all-out rebellion against Jin and his provincial authority. When, two years later, Sheng Shicai became the leader of Xinjiang, he allowed the Hami Turkic nobles to continue their rule, but under the new title of district commissioner.⁵⁴

Farther west of Hami and Turfan, on the southern slope of the Tien Shan range, are traces of the hereditary minority rule. By 1929, a Torgut khan living in the mountains about forty-five kilometres, or ninety *li*, from Yanqi (Karashahr) surprisingly kept his tiny tribal court in the same manner as the Chinggis Khan did in his time. Envoys from the 13th Dalai Lama in Lhasa, from the 9th Panchen Lama in China proper, and from other Mongol tribes of Soviet Central Asia could be seen from time to time travelling there. According to a first-hand report of that time, this Torgut hereditary ruler was also a powerful Gegen (Buddhist reincarnation), and he maintained his own fierce and well-trained "Cossack" force that was, according to the author of the report, "only second to the Japanese troops in Asia."⁵⁵ Prince Min, the son of the aforementioned Torgut khan, who succeeded his father in the 1930s, continued to play a significant role in Nationalist China's Central Asian affairs. Toward the end of the 1940s, Prince Min's status as a hereditary khan among the Torguts remained prestigious, and on the eve of the Communist takeover, even foreign diplomats had to rely on his opinions for a view of how the ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang regarded the Communists and how they perceived their future relations with the latter.⁵⁶

In the southwestern peripheries of Kham (Xikang), Yunnan, Sichuan, and Kokonor, it was often the influential hereditary native chieftains (*tusi*), not the provincially appointed magistrates, who had the final say in local affairs. One such *tusi*-dominated area was Muli, on the border of Yunnan and Xikang. As one piece of field research from the early 1930s demonstrates, this Muli tribal kingdom "was ruled by a monarch with absolute spiritual and temporal sway over 22,000 subjects of Tibetan, Naxi, and other nationalities."⁵⁷ The same

source suggests that on all sides of the Muli kingdom there were lawless bandits: to the south and southeast was the Lolo tribe, and to the west was another independent kingdom with a court set up at a big monastery by a “bandit chief.” The native chieftain system was so deep rooted and so difficult to eradicate that even Chiang Kai-shek’s exiled KMT regime in Taiwan in the 1960s had to admit that during the Nationalist period its authority had never reached these *de facto* independent minority regions in the remote southwest hinterlands. In the Nanking decade, as officials of the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission pointed out, the most “unruly” and “obstinate” tribal states were Golok on the Sichuan-Kokonor border, the thirty-nine tribes of the southern Kokonor region, and the Po-me kingdom on the Kham-Tibetan-Assam frontier.³⁸ As late as the eve of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, the writ of distant Nanking authorities could hardly extend into any piece of peripheral Chinese territory, and the aforementioned invincible and informal minority kingdoms still lingered on well into the postwar and early Communist periods.

TERRITORIAL FRAGMENTATION AND NANKING’S STATE BUILDING

In many respects, the Nationalist government in Nanking was just another of the many independent regimes existing in 1930s China. Yet what made Chiang Kai-shek and the government he controlled distinct from other autonomous regimes was that he viewed China as being in desperate need of an “integrating force,” and he believed that the KMT and his government represented such a force.³⁹ In order to build the strong, consolidated central authority that was imperative for creating a modern Chinese state, Chiang ceaselessly pursued every possible military and political means to extend Nanking’s influence to the other regions of China. Nevertheless, his ambitions inevitably collided with the regional militarists, who were primarily concerned with preserving their interests within their spheres of influence. The outcome of these incompatible objectives was a series of bloody civil wars between Nanking and the warlord regimes. In March 1929, the Guangxi clique was the first to revolt against Chiang Kai-shek, only to be suppressed. Two months later, Nanking clashed with Feng Yuxiang in Henan when Chiang undermined Feng’s influence in northern China by bribing Feng’s troops to submit to Chiang’s direct control. In early 1930, a much larger-scale anti-Chiang movement was launched by Yan Xishan, Feng Yuxiang, and the Guangxi clique. War broke out in spring and lasted until September, when Zhang Xueliang and his northeast troops announced their support of the KMT government.⁴⁰

A quarter of a million casualties made the war against the warlord rebels the bloodiest of the Nationalist era to that time. Chiang Kai-shek realized that the cost of military campaigns was high and the outcome was uncertain, and from that time on Nanking and the local militarists effectively settled down to a situation of mutual tolerance, despite occasional clashes.⁴¹ More important,

since the early 1930s, Chiang and his regime had been engaged in another difficult war against the Communists, and Nanking could ill afford major campaigns against the warlords at the same time.

Nevertheless, the task of state building and the gradual expansion of Nationalist influence had always been Chiang Kai-shek's main concern. From 1934 on, the Communists were forced out of the base they had created in the southern part of central China, and embarked upon their Long March through western China to Shaanxi. When the Communists entered warlord provinces, the provincial leaders invariably accepted the armies that Chiang sent to assist them. With his own troops installed in the provincial capital, Chiang would then try to initiate financial and construction programs to bind these provinces closer to Nanking. When the Nationalist forces departed, they would leave some central government soldiers and staff behind. In this fashion, Nanking gradually increased its influence in areas previously not controlled by the KMT, and it was able to reorganize such areas along its own lines.⁴² Moreover, when the Japanese threat grew after 1936, some provincial leaders were willing to close ranks with the Nationalist government to resist the invaders, and others found their followers clamouring for resistance to Japan. Thus, by the end of the Nanking decade, China experienced greater solidarity and unity than it had known for some decades. But right up to that time, provincialism and warlordism still flourished, and a substratum of provincial autonomy persisted even during the war against Japan.⁴³

In the summer of 1928, when the Nationalist Revolutionary Army captured Peking, and Chiang Kai-shek together with his four other most powerful allies – Yan Xishan, Feng Yuxiang, Li Zongren, and Bai Chongxi – gathered at the famous Xiangshan Temple to pay their belated homage to the late revolutionary forerunner Sun Yat-sen, the future of China momentarily looked bright. The new KMT-designed national flags could be seen hoisted from Canton to Mukden, from Shanghai to Lanzhou and Urumqi. Apart from Outer Mongolia and Tibet, the autonomous local warlords and their provincial governments all displayed their professed political loyalty to the new Nationalist government in Nanking, recognizing Chiang Kai-shek as the new national leader of the Chinese Republic. However, the outbreak of civil wars between Nanking and regional forces in the late 1920s, as well as the continuous foreign encroachments on the border territories in the early 1930s, shattered the solid national image that the KMT Nationalists endeavoured to create. And not surprisingly, by the early 1930s China was once again facing a round of territorial dismemberment.

Nonetheless, we should not overlook the psychological effect of the theoretical reunification of China in 1928. The Northern Expedition had momentarily led a considerable number of remote independent minority communities on the frontier, along with their lay and theocratic leaders, to believe that a reunified Nationalist China under Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT

was in a stronger position vis-à-vis its unresolved and problematic frontier and minority issues. The 13th Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government he dominated were one such example. By 1929-30, high authorities in Lhasa were generally convinced that a relatively stable Nationalist central regime would be capable of commanding the warlords of Sichuan and Kokonor, thus providing the Tibetans with the needed mediation to relieve the long-lasting boundary tensions between Tibet and southwest China. The Dalai Lama's expectation of a new Chinese political landscape largely contributed to a closer interaction between Lhasa and Nanking in 1929-30. This is treated in detail in Chapter 3.

So what was the real strategy of Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist government in Nanking with respect to the frontier and minority issues? Was there any substantial difference between the Nationalist government's "revolutionary" frontier strategy and that of the defunct Qing court? In the face of precarious external relations and an increasingly tumultuous military and political state of affairs in China proper in the 1930s, how did KMT frontier policy planners formulate Nanking's strategy of interaction with border peoples and their autonomous regimes? What were the real purposes behind these policy calculations? And, more fundamentally, who were the frontier policy makers in Nationalist China? The following chapters will address these questions.