

# Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers

A journey to the west

Hsiao-ting Lin



Routledge Studies in the Modern History of Asia

# Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers

The purpose of this book is to examine the strategies and practices of the Han Chinese Nationalists vis-à-vis post-Qing dynasty China's ethnic minorities, as well as to explore the role they played in the formation of contemporary China's Central Asian frontier territoriality and border security.

The Chinese Revolution of 1911, initiated by Sun Yat-sen, liberated the Han Chinese from the rule of the Manchus and ended the Qing dynastic order that had existed for centuries. With the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the Mongols and the Tibetans, who had been dominated by the Manchus, took advantage of the revolution and declared their independence. Under the leadership of Yuan Shikai, the new Chinese Republican government in Peking in turn proclaimed the similar "five-nationality Republic" proposed by the Revolutionaries as a model with which to sustain the deteriorating Qing territorial order. The shifting politics of the multi-ethnic state during the regime transition and the role those politics played in defining the identity of the modern Chinese state were issues that would haunt the new Chinese Republic from its inception to its downfall.

*Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers* will be of interest to students and scholars of Chinese history, Asian history, and modern history.

**Hsiao-ting Lin** is a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, US.

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**Hsiao-ting Lin**



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# Preface

*Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers: A Journey to the West* is meant to be a companion to my earlier book, *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier: Intrigues and Ethnopolitics, 1928–49*. In my first book, I examined China's policy toward Tibet during the Nationalist era (1928–49). I argued that modern China's Tibetan frontier was neither the subject of concerted aggression by a centralized and indoctrinated Chinese Nationalist government, nor of an ideologically driven nationalist ethnopolitics. Instead, modern China's sovereignty claim over Tibet was much more the result of rhetorical grandstanding by the Nationalists than a definite plan to exert direct control over the region. My first book also delineates how, during the divisive and chaotic Nationalist period, Chinese ethnic territoriality continued to change from a traditional empire to a modern nation-state, often in unexpected and inadvertent ways.

This book further undertakes an important enquiry into the making of modern China's frontier territoriality and the nature of Nationalist ethnic frontiers from a fresh and broader perspective. It was stimulated, to a large extent, by a reviewer of *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier* who remarked that I should further stretch the focus from Tibet to modern China's other Inner Asian ethnic borderlands that were inherited from the Qing imperial house and the Peking-based Republican government by the originally localized, power-restrained Chinese Nationalist regime. In conclusion, this review article strongly suggested I re-examine the nature of the Nationalist frontier and ethnic politics as well as its impact on the formation of post-1949 contemporary China's border security and ethnic territoriality.

To a considerable degree, this new research is also stimulated by a series of political unrests in China's ethnic frontiers in recent years. One still remembers the ethnic minorities' anti-government riots in Lhasa and Khotan before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, the abortive attempt by the Muslim Uighurs to crash a domestic airplane flying between Urumqi and Beijing around the same time, and the Uighur–Han ethnic confrontations in Urumqi and other oasis cities in Xinjiang in 2009. These incidents strongly indicate that governing China's far-flung ethnic borderlands has been, and will continue to be, a haunting challenge to the leaders of the People's Republic of China. *Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers* is therefore both an extension to my previous book and a response to a timely and

important research topic which has been, and continues to be, one of present-day China's most pressing issues.

There has been an explosion of history-writing in the recent decade. Volumes exploring modern Chinese ethnic frontiers and minority histories of varying geographical scope and subject matters are to be found on the shelves of bookshops everywhere, together with histories of every other time and place. With little doubt, the issues relating to China's complicated ethnicity and ethnopolitics, from the Qing imperial period to the early People's Republic, have become a trendy focus in recent scholarships. Among recent literature, some are intended for an academic audience, some cover only limited periods of time and space, some focus on particular non-Han ethnic characters, and still some are based entirely on Western or secondary Chinese sources. In this book my purpose has been to try to provide for both specialists and general readers, a concise, overall picture of modern China's frontier and ethnic politics from the late Qing of the 1900s to the People's Republic in the early 1950s, during which period the Han-Chinese Nationalists were the main players of post-imperial China's politics. My aim has been to counter the over-simplified and stereotyped notion that, when it comes to ethnic territorial disposition, the Nationalists and their regime, indoctrinated under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, were revolutionary and ideologically oriented, and had perennially resorted to nationalism to restore post-Qing China's sovereignty over frontier territories and ethnic peoples.

I would say that it is not the intention of this book to focus on a specific incident or event as a case study to demonstrate how the Nationalists dealt with China's ethnic-frontier issues according to the aforementioned assumption. Rather, I try to illuminate what best characterizes modern China's ethnic frontiers and politics. By providing a broad and clear view of how modern China's ethnic frontiers and orders has slowly evolved, this research elucidates the main factors leading to the Nationalist presence in the defunct Qing Empire's territorial reaches in western frontiers, where the post-1949 Chinese Communists substantiated their authority within a relatively short span of time. To a large extent, this process of Nationalist power stretch into non-Han ethnic peripheries was closely related to how the modern Chinese state was defined or re-defined, and how post-imperial Chinese ethnic frontier politics was exploited by the Nationalists as a way to fulfill their goals of state-building and regime consolidation.

This book is perhaps one of the very first English-language studies to provide a comprehensive survey of the development and evolution of Chinese Nationalist frontier and ethnopolitical practice. I hope it will fill an important lacuna in the historical scholarship on modern China which has tended to focus on the frontier ethnopolitics of the Qing Empire and the Chinese Communists while missing the important bridging role played by the Chinese Nationalists and their regime.

This research has benefited substantially from the release of new modern Chinese source materials in recent years. With the availability of Nationalist Chinese official documents, private papers and diaries of top Nationalist leaders

like Chiang Kai-shek and T.V. Soong, a reassessment of modern China's history has not only become a possibility, but also a necessity. Having access to these new materials not only helps us obtain a more balanced perception toward the Nationalists and the Chinese politics of their time, but also allows us to realize how these leaders conceptualized a China which they endeavored to administer. Without a doubt, one important, thorny, and yet unavoidable agenda confronting these Nationalist leaders was post-imperial China's ethnic frontier and minority issues, and China's transformation from a multi-ethnic empire to a nation-state that had brought about these issues.

In short, this book scrutinizes practices and policy-choices of Nationalist China's frontier territorial agenda. Readers may discover that I have sought to de-construct and de-ideologize the Nationalists' strategies to substantiate their authority in peripheral China, and tried to demonstrate that the making of modern China's central authority in the Inner Asian frontiers was closely related to the external and domestic factors that had threatened the security and survival of the originally localized Nationalist regime. Seeing this historical phenomenon as a display of "opportunistic nationalism" or "pragmatic nationalism" on China's ethnic frontiers, I argue that this power-furtherance process in China's traditional peripheries was more the result of political reluctance, incidentals, and inevitability on the part of the Nationalists than the deliberately orchestrated ethnopolitics predominated by their revolutionary ideologies. The rationale behind this process, as I will show in this book, was mainly regime survival and security. The exploration of this topic, I hope, will offer a sweeping reappraisal of modern Chinese nationalism in the context of the central regime's opportunistic and pragmatic practices to cope with complex and delicate ethnic territorial issues. It is also my wish that readers will find this work exciting, discovering that what emerges from it is a new understanding of the Nationalists' flexibility and strategic policy toward China's far-flung ethnic frontiers.

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 Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek, Nanking, and Peking, are retained.

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Several of these chapters have been read in some preliminary form at conferences and workshops, and I am grateful to the following hosts for the opportunity for discussion and debate: Chinese Institute, Oxford University; Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (Taiwan); Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Beijing); and the History Departments at National Chengchi University, Tunghai University, and Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan. Portions of Chapter 6 and the Epilogue first appeared in a different form as “From Rimland to Heartland: Nationalist China’s Geopolitics and Ethnopolitics in Central Asia, 1937–1952” in *International History Review*, vol. 30, no. 1 (March 2008), pp. 52–75. I acknowledge the journal’s permission to use these materials in my book with great gratitude. I want to express my deep appreciation to the staff at the Routledge, especially my acquisition editors Stephanie Rogers and Leanne Hinves, who went out of their way to help me prepare the manuscript for publication in an extraordinarily efficient fashion. My gratitude also goes to the two anonymous readers for their useful comments and suggestions.

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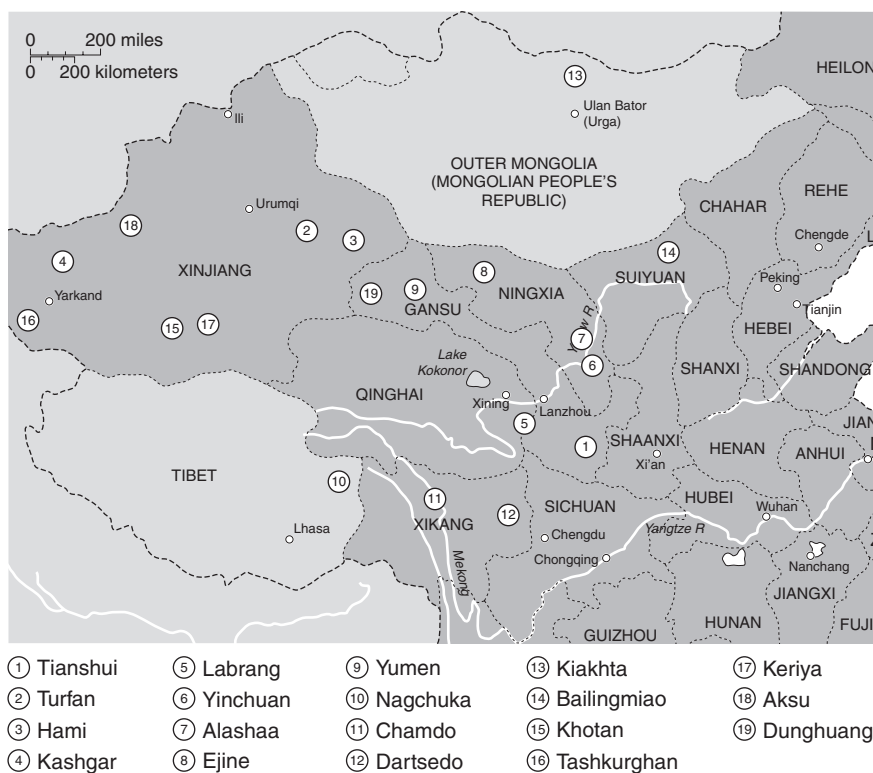
# Acronyms and abbreviations

AAH	Guoshiguan Dang'an (Archives of the Academia Historica)
AKMT	Guomintang Dangshihui Dang'an (Archives of the Kuomintang Historical Committee)
AMFA-1	Waijiaobu Dang'an (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; deposited in the Academia Historica, Taipei)
AMFA-2	Waijiaobu Dang'an (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; deposited in the Institute of Modern History Archives, Academia Sinica, Taipei)
ANG	Guomin Zhengfu Dang'an (Archives of the Nationalist government)
ASNDC	Guofang Zuigao Weiyuanhui Dang'an (Archives of the Supreme National Defense Council)
CB	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Choubi (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Plans and Directives)
CKSD	Chiang Kai-shek Diaries (Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, California)
FO	Foreign Office (United Kingdom)
FRUS	<i>Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers</i>
GW/BW	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Geming Wenxian/Kanluan Shiqi/Zhengzhi-Bianwu (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Revolutionary documents/Rebellion suppressing/Politics: Frontier Affairs)
GW/DZ	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Geming Wenxian/Kangzhan Fanlue: Dihou Zuozhan (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Revolutionary documents/General plans for the War of Resistance: Operations behind the Enemy Lines)
GW/ZJ	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Geming Wenxian/Kangzhan Fanlue: Zhengjun (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Revolutionary documents/General plans for the War of Resistance: Consolidation of the Army)
KMT	Kuomintang (Nationalist Party)
MTAC	Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission (the Nationalist government)
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collections (United Kingdom)

PRC	People's Republic of China
SNDC	Supreme National Defense Council (the Nationalist government)
TD/JMBZ	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Tejiao Dang'an/Junshi/Jin-Ma ji Bianqu Zuozhan (Specially submitted archives/Military/Operations in Kinmen, Matsu, and Border Regions)
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TD/YB	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Tejiao Dang'an/Zhengzhi/Yiban Bianzheng (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Specially submitted archives/Politics/General Frontier Politics)
TD/XW	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Tejiao Dang'an/Zhengzhi/Xizang Wenti (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Specially submitted archives/Politics/Tibetan Issues)
TD/XinW	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Tejiao Dang'an/Zhengzhi/Xinjiang Wenti (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Specially submitted archives/Politics/Xinjiang Issues)
TW	Jiang Zhongzheng Zongtong Dang'an: Tejiao Wendian/Lingxiu Shigong/Jiji Zhibian (President Chiang Kai-shek Collections: Specially submitted dispatches/Leader's Deeds/Frontier Endeavors)
USDS	<i>Records of the Department of State relating to Internal Affairs of China</i> (microfilm series)
USFR	United States National Archives, State Department Archives
USMIR	<i>United States Military Intelligence Report, China, 1911–1941</i> (microfilm)
Waijiaobu	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Nationalist government)
WO	War Office records (United Kingdom)
YXSP	Yan Xishan Dang'an (Yan Xishan papers)
YXZG	<i>Yuan Yilai Xizang Difang yu Zhongyang Zhengfu Guanxi Dang'an Shiliao Huibian</i> (collection of historical materials from the archives on the relationship between the Tibetan area and the central government since the Yuan)
ZJSYZ	<i>Zongtong Jiangong Sixiang Yanlun Zongji</i> (General collections of President Chiang Kai-shek's thoughts and speeches)
ZMDZH	<i>Zhonghua Minguoshi Dang'an Ziliao Huibian</i> (compendium of historical materials on the Republic of China)
ZZSC	<i>Zhonghua Minguo Zhongyao Shiliao Chubian—Dui Ri Kangzhan Shiqi</i> (First selection of historical materials on the Republic of China – the period of the war against Japan)



Map 1 Nationalist China in the 1930s.



Map 2 China's western frontiers.

# Prologue

On February 29, 1952, Chiang Kai-shek received a top-secret proposal. A few weeks before, Taipei had received a confidential report from Nationalist spies in Communist-controlled China reporting that they had established contacts with a number of influential ethnic minority leaders along China's Central Asian border regions. According to the report, these ethnic minority leaders shared Chiang's animosity towards the Chinese Communists and wished to reestablish the amicable relationship they had shared with the Nationalists before 1949. The leaders were prepared to join forces with the Taiwan-based Nationalist regime and launch a guerilla war against the Communists on the mainland. Those who were willing to cooperate included Huang Zhengqing, the former leader of the Labrang Tibetans in southern Gansu; Ma Yuanxiang, a Tungan Muslim general with blood ties to the renowned Ma Muslim family in Chinese Central Asia; Pal-gonchrinle, a Golok native-chieftain (*tusi*) from the Sichuan-Qinghai border; and Su Yonghe, a Khampa native-chieftain from Nagchuka on the Qinghai-Tibetan border. According to Nationalist intelligence reports, these leaders altogether commanded about 80,000 irregulars. Once well armed and equipped, Taipei estimated that the new force would establish a base of military operations in China's western borderlands, thus facilitating what Taipei expected would be a protracted war against the Communists. Chiang's military advisors were convinced that these new military resources, although scattered and still ill-trained, would be of considerable value to their effort to recapture the Chinese mainland, and therefore convinced Chiang to accept the minority leaders' support.<sup>1</sup>

This acceptance was by no means an isolated event, as the exiled Nationalists continued to accept and even to seek out the aid of ethnic minority groups. By mid-1952, two and a half years after their retreat to the island of Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist remnants were still optimistic about the possibility of a renewed military effort that would carry them back to the Chinese mainland. With the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, the Nationalists took advantage of the rapidly changing international scenario in East Asia to urge the Truman administration to render more military and diplomatic support so as to transform Taiwan into a solid anti-Communist base. After the US Seventh Fleet arrived in the Taiwan Strait in the summer of 1950, thus securing their position on the island, the Nationalists actively and energetically tried to revitalize their

former connections with non-Han ethnic minority leaders in China's Central Asian borderlands, whose forces continued to be a major target of the Chinese Communists.<sup>2</sup> By 1952, with coastal China now under total Communist control, the far-flung ethnic borderlands in the west and its large minority population became central to the island-based Nationalists' plan to solicit local support and establish military bases against the entrenched Communists.

It was within this strategic and political framework that in May 1952 Chiang's secret agents contacted Ma Liang, who commanded 2,000 guerrillas on the Gansu–Qinghai border. Ma, a distant relative of Ma Bufang, the former Nationalist governor of Qinghai, willingly accepted his appointment as commander-in-chief of the 103rd Route of the Nationalist Army. He sent his confidants to Nagchuka, where they awaited airdrops from the CIA-operated Western Enterprises, Inc. containing munitions, wireless radio equipment, and 150 taels of gold bars. This secret operation was conducted as part of Taipei's broader goals, which also included the recruitment of several reputed Tibetan Buddhist prelates who had fled to Taiwan following the Communist takeover in 1949. The new allies, including the Janggiya Hutuktu and the Kanjurwa Hutuktu, were asked to generate propaganda intended to encourage their erstwhile ethnic minority followers in Inner Mongolia, Qinghai and Xikang to rise against the Communists.<sup>3</sup>

In the first months of 1952, the Nationalists' underground activities in China's western frontiers had become so effective that at one point the majority of intelligence information came from officials as high in the Communist hierarchy as Marshal Yang Yong, then the Communist chairman of Guizhou Province and commander of the Air Force in the Communist Southwest Military Region. Jeremy Brown's new research has demonstrated that, in the early 1950s, Communist control over Guizhou remained extremely tenuous.<sup>4</sup> In April 1952, as illuminated by recently declassified Chinese archival materials, Yang was approached by Nationalist secret agents and allegedly expressed his willingness to defect to Chiang Kai-shek. Yang surreptitiously accepted Taipei's titular appointment as commander-in-chief of the fictitious Southwestern Anti-Communist National Salvation Army. Yang also promised to act in coordination with Taipei once Nationalist forces had established a position in southwest China. In return for his cooperation, Yang requested that Chiang grant him the same venerable position as that of Communist veteran Marshal Liu Bocheng if the Nationalists returned to power in China.<sup>5</sup> Brown's research also indicates that, at this juncture, a force of 8,000 Nationalist guerrillas remained intact in the Sichuan–Yunnan–Guizhou border region, where they continued to receive instructions from Taipei.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Nationalists and modern China's ethnopolitics**

In the early 1950s, despite the Nationalists' expulsion from the mainland as a result of the civil war, Nationalist influence in China's remote Central Asian frontiers persisted. By reviving its former ties with ethnic minority communities in China's western borderlands, the exiled Nationalist regime in Taiwan endeav-