

FRONTIER HISTORY OF SOUTHERN KHAM:
BANDITRY AND WAR IN THE MULTI-ETHNIC FRINGE
LANDS OF CHATRING, MILI, AND GYETHANG, 1890-1940

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On 19 June 1906, Chinese soldiers under the command of Chao Erh-feng, entered the Tibetan monastery of Sangpiling in the southern Kham district of Chatring or Hsiangcheng.¹ It had taken a full seven-month siege to take the monastery-fort, leaving the besiegers utterly exhausted and the besieged utterly defeated. Local feelings, for many years after the event, are perhaps best summed up in the words of an American missionary living in the area at the time: "And to this day every Shangchen Tibetan hates a Chinaman." The story is too well known to be repeated here, yet to gain an impression of the scale of the event, it may be well to remember that several thousand monk-defenders and laymen inside and several thousand heavily-armed Chinese soldiers outside the monastery were involved.³ The district

¹ Sperling 1976:17-18.

² Shelton 1923:96.

³ As far as European-language sources about the siege of Sangpiling are concerned, it might be wise to distinguish between sources written during or shortly after the event and told to passers-by not too long afterwards, and later compilations. In the first category, we have an eye witness report by Chao's interpreter Wei, as found in John Huston Edgar's report about his journey in the Hsiangcheng region together with the Reverend J.R. Muir in September 1907. See Edgar 1935:13-22 which refers in effect back to Muir's diary as published in *The North China Herald* twenty-seven years earlier. Muir's 'Diary' apparently also served as the basis for a Foreign Office report under the title of *Siege of Hsiang-Cheng* [from the diary of Revd. J. Muir, Encl.2 in No.55, Jordan to Grey, 7 January 1908 in *F O 535/11*, referred to by Mehra 1974:69, note 5]. Primary information on the siege may also be filtered from Bacot 1909:178-182 [from a journey in a neighboring area in the first half of 1907], retold with some additional information in Bacot 1988:134-139 [the narrative of his second journey when he actually visited Sangpiling in October 1910]. Moreover, Bacot 1912:140 features two rare photographs taken from different angles from the monastic complex of Sangpiling. Another narrative is by Tafel 1914(2):207-209 (extensive note 1), based on his journey to Eastern Tibet, which brought him to Tachienlu in May 1907, where he saw the Chinese military activity in the area and obtained firsthand information on the siege of Sangpiling the year before. His story contains a few details not to be found in other root stories on the event. Then there is the fictional narrative written by Filchner 1924:158-189. Attractive and apparently well researched as it is, this book is sometimes taken as a scien-

was located in southeastern Tibet where the pale of Tibetan civilization intermingled with the multi-ethnic fringe lands of northern Yunnan. Chatring, or Hsiangcheng by which name it was commonly known to the Chinese, was divided into Upper Hsiangcheng, governed by an indigenous chief who answered to the jurisdiction of the Deba of Litang, and the Lower Hsiangcheng lands which paid allegiance to the monastery of Sangpiling. However, both Upper and Lower Hsiangcheng were considered an integral part of the principality of Litang.⁴ To the south and west lay the plateau of Derong, the most southern part of the neighboring principality of Ba,⁵ and to the east and southeast, the lands of Do⁶ and Gangkarling, better known as Konkaling.⁷ Further southeast, already within Yunnan jurisdiction, lay the 'Lama Kingdom of Muli', headed by a hereditary lama and his entourage, governing a mixed population of Tibeto-Burman stock.⁸ Further westward was Gyethang, or Chungtien as it is

tific history, a fact noticed already by Snelling 1993:39 (esp. note 18, p.276). In his autobiography, Filchner 1950:166 explicitly states that *Sturm über Asien*, though to be trusted in outline, is political fiction after all. A good example of this debatable reliability is the Plan of Sangpiling shown on p.160 of his 1924 book. Filchner cannot have had any firsthand knowledge of the monastery and its surroundings, as he never visited this part of Tibet and certainly nowhere around 1906. It is my informed guess that he drew the Plan after the two photographs of Sangpiling in Bacot 1912:140. Imperceptibly we have moved toward the second category, later compilations on the siege of Sangpiling. But some of them were probably well informed. Such is the case with the contribution of the missionary F. Goré (1923:349). Useful compilations too, probably based on British intelligence sources, are Younghusband 1910:371, and Teichman 1922:21-22. W.D. Shakabpa's account of the siege (1967:225) is largely based on Younghusband 1910 and Teichman 1922. Dhondup's short reference to the event (1986:25-26) is seemingly based on Shakabpa, but contains some added contextual information. I should very much like to know whether there are any genuine eye witness or firsthand Tibetan reports of the Siege of Sangpiling.

⁴ Soulié 1897:59-60. For a short journey to Upper Hsiancheng (1915), see Shelton 1923:143-156 [diary].

⁵ Soulié 1904:92, 97.

⁶ Soulié 1897:54-55; Bacot 1912:116, and photos facing pp.112, 114, 120, and 130.

⁷ Bacot 1912:125-130, photos facing pp.126, 130; see also the well-illustrated article by Rock 1931:1-65. Though Rock did not visit 'Konkaling' [Gangkarling] Monastery personally, he did visit the bandit-ridden eastern part of the district centering on the Konkaling snow peaks. For a photographic impression, see Rock 1947: plates 55-59.

⁸ By and large, the Muli area, like the other areas mentioned, has been little traveled, but see Amundsen 1900:620-625 [map, p.623]; Johnston 1908:213-233, also notes on pp.428-433; Davies 1970:235-252; Kingdon Ward 1924:122-147 [journey

often named in the literature at the time, a district under Chinese suzerainty since 1724, but with a powerful clerical opposition ever since that date.⁹ Just like Muli, Chungtien formed a transitional zone between the Tibetan culture world to the north and the only partially sinicized tribal lands to the south.

It is within the wider geo-historical context of these Sino-Tibetan frontier lands that I want to assess the historical importance of the siege of Sangpiling, as well as the following period of unprecedented growth of banditry and general lawlessness in the area. According to Kristof, a frontier is an outward-oriented marchland, a border area in which the effective territorial control of the central state is limited. It is also an area of potential expansion, one of a forward moving culture, bent on occupying the whole belt in front.¹⁰ Historically speaking, the Sino-Tibetan multi-ethnic fringe lands display all the characteristics of a frontier region, and that so in a double sense. Whereas the local border populations in varying degrees had experienced a cultural, but less so political, integration into the Tibetan mold, the Chinese at different periods had tried to subdue areas of rebellious incidence, which in their definition were 'tributary' to China, but over which they had only nominal control. Especially in the years after 1904, in what may be interpreted as a direct response to the Younghusband Expedition, the Chinese launched an outright forward policy in their Western fringe lands, intent on establishing a firmer political, and in effect military, control.¹¹ Although the history of Kham, mainly on the basis of Tibetan and Chinese sources, is increasingly in the process of being unraveled, I propose here to highlight the contribution the older European-language literature can make to this attempt at reconstruction. After all, travelers, missionaries, and political agents had a chance to see and hear things, which, when put in their proper context, provide us with an additional perspective on the frontier history under review.

1921]; Kingdon Ward 1931:11-31 [journey 1913]; Rock 1925:447-492 [the most accessible account]; see also Rock 1930:385-437; Roosevelt and Roosevelt 1929:93-126; Schäfer 1933:208-242; Stevens 1934:57-88; Potts 1940:222-233; and, of course, Kessler 1986 [which had the great virtue, amongst many others, of providing the initial stimulus for my interest in the area]. See also McKhann 1998:23-45.

⁹ Siguret 1937:14-44 [Tchong-Tien (Chungtien), but beware of the KMT point of view]; Wiens 1967:321-327.

¹⁰ Kristof 1959:270-271.

¹¹ Sperling 1976:10-36.

It is precisely against the above background that a discussion of historical events on the Sino-Tibetan frontier should be set, because it gives a structural framework from which to start our analysis. First, it is necessary to discuss the historical events surrounding the Sangpiling siege in terms of the transitional historical period covering the demise of the Ch'ing Empire, the geopolitical contest for Tibet, as well as the Chinese Revolution of 1911. Second, a structural discussion of regional characteristics is needed, preferably in terms of the explanatory power of the geographical setting, the multi-ethnic background of the region, and the territorial structure of its local political power holders. Finally, by way of conclusion, it will perhaps be possible to shed some theoretical light on the structural developments within the wider setting of southern Kham frontier history.

Frontier History Between the Yangtse and the Yalung

An historical event like the siege of Sangpiling in 1906 did not occur out of the blue. There are related events before and after, just as these events were geographically situated in the lands of Hsiangcheng, Gyethang, and Mili, as well as within the wider frontier settings of the Tibetan principalities of Litang and Ba, and the Yunnan-Szechuan provincial border divide. Although we cannot pursue it in detail here, an important question concerns political unrest in the area under review regarding the influence of possible disturbances in the Chatring-Hsiangcheng region resulting from the campaigns of Nyagrong Mgon po rnam rgyal, the nineteenth century Khampa warlord who tried to establish a personal state in Eastern Tibet in the years 1835-1865.¹² According to one map,¹³ Chatring was part of Nyagrong Mgon rnam's territorial and military exploits, although reports disagree on whether Chatring felt the full reverberations of war.¹⁴ If it did, it may have planted the seeds of political unrest in the region later in the nineteenth century. In any case, when Father Soulié, a French missionary, visited the Hsiangcheng region in October,

¹² See Tsering 1985:196-214.

¹³ Tsering 1985, map facing p.198.

¹⁴ Tsering 1985:203, esp. note 32. Cf. Soulié 1897:51-52, who noticed in the sub-districts of Molashog and Do on the eastern boundary with Hsiangcheng quite a few material remains which showed the area had once been more thickly populated and that the area under settled agriculture must have been rather more extended.

1894,¹⁵ he heard of recent friction in the area.¹⁶ It seems at that time the monastery of Sangpiling was growing in political power. Though entitled to an annual payment by the Deba of Litang, to which they nominally belonged, the monks, or at least the abbot, had the impertinence or the courage to ask for a larger amount which the Deba refused. This put the monks of Sangpiling in a spirit of revolt, causing them to rend the Litang Deba's authority.¹⁷ At this point there is the intervening story of a Chinese military officer from Litang and his son visiting the Hsiangcheng area, but who unfortunately were killed, possibly at the instigation of the abbot of Sangpiling. A party of Chinese troops was sent to punish the offenders, but they were defeated.¹⁸ Perhaps as a corollary to the latter event, the Deba of Litang decided to wage war on Sangpiling, asking for reinforcements in early November 1894, from the inhabitants of Molashog and Do.¹⁹ Under the circumstances it proved impossible for Soulié to visit Sangpiling. Chao Erh-feng's interpreter, Wei, in his account of the siege of Sangpiling more than a decade later, wants us to believe that Sangpiling's allegiance had shifted to the Dalai Lama, and that the abbot of Sangpiling became ruler of Hsiangcheng allegedly on the former's behalf.²⁰ Chinese influence in the area for the next ten years was reduced to almost nothing, and an occasional Chinese casualty or misfortune proved this point.²¹ In the meantime, Sangpiling Monastery fortified its position as a center of illegal traffic, partly in slaves hailing from Menkong in Tsarong, westwards across the Yangtse and the Mekong.²²

But it is at a higher level of geopolitical inquiry that the conditions are to be found for a radically altered Sino-Tibetan frontier history after the turn of the century. It was the Younghusband Expedition of 1904 that made the Chinese fundamentally reassess their Eastern

¹⁵ Soulié 1897:36-80.

¹⁶ Soulié 1897:55.

¹⁷ Soulié 1897:60; cf. Adshead 1984:57.

¹⁸ Sperling 1976:17.

¹⁹ Soulié 1897:66.

²⁰ Wei's 'Account', as to be found in Edgar 1935:16; Adshead 1984:68.

²¹ Edgar 1935:15 refers to a Chinese military officer flayed alive by the 'Hsiangcheng lamas' in 1902; and in the winter of 1905, a company of Chinese soldiers, who had come to summon the abbot of Sangpiling to swear allegiance to China, was "treated with contumely" (Younghusband 1910:372).

²² Edgar 1935:17; cf. Kingdon Ward 1923:178ff. [slave-dealing of the Tsa-rong Tibetans].

Tibetan frontier position. The eighteenth century boundary line, just west of the Yangtse near Batang,²³ had never been translated into an effective territorial and political control in the outlying areas east of the Yangtse and west of the Yalung. Hence, the British thrust into Central Tibet was seen as a direct threat to Eastern Tibet by the Chinese. It is not the place here to repeat everything that has been written about the Chinese reaction in the east.²⁴ Suffice it to say that political and military measures taken under Chao Erh-feng were both radical and bloody. In the course of events at Batang in 1905, the principal monastery was razed to the ground, after which its surviving monks fled southward to the Sangpiling Monastery in the *de facto* independent Hsiangcheng district. They were joined by their co-religionists from the great monasteries of northwestern Yunnan which had been looted by Chinese troops and had risen in turn.²⁵ The result was that thousands of angry monks and frightened laymen flocked together in the Sangpiling Monastery, which eventually led to its siege and fall.²⁶ In the neighboring district of Do, the main monastery of Chongtang, thought to have harbored some six hundred monks at one time,²⁷ initially succeeded in defending itself, but in June 1906, had to surrender, after which forty-eight monks were beheaded.²⁸ The monastery of Konkaling too fell into Chinese hands.²⁹

In the years after the 1905-1906 revolt had been crushed, Chao introduced a program of political and social reform, meant to establish tighter Chinese administrative control. The *tussu* structure of indirect rule, by which Chinese officials were sometimes attached to local chiefs, was now abolished, though its effectiveness had already been questioned in 1902. Political power, by that time already, seems

²³ Cf. Lamb 1989:49, note 73.

²⁴ But see Teichman 1922:19-34; Goré 1923:348-351; Mehra 1974:67-79; and in particular Sperling 1976:10-36.

²⁵ Younghusband 1910:370-371; Teichman 1922:21.

²⁶ For the relevant sources, see note 3.

²⁷ Soulié 1897:54 ["5 à 600 lamas"]; the end map of Soulié's article shows a figure of 600.

²⁸ Dhondup 1986:26. Bacot (1912:115, 117) found the monastery a couple of years later occupied by the Chinese, but apparently their presence went not uncontested. For an impression of Chongtang, see p.114 (photo facing).

²⁹ Goré 1923:349. For photos of the Konkaling region and its monastery, see Bacot 1912:124, 126, and 130 (*infra*).

to have shifted into the hands of the Tibetan Buddhist clergy.³⁰ By 1908, Chao had established a number of Chinese magistracies (*hsien*), amongst them Ting-hsiang hsien, the former Chatring or Hsiangcheng,³¹ by which he hoped to establish tighter control in the area. Stringent measures were taken to curb the power of the monastic establishment,³² and some modern education was introduced.³³ But the Chinese-Tibetan contest for local power was by no means yet over. As Louis King, British consul in Tachienlu, was to write a few years later: "Had it not been for the lamas, Chao's work would undoubtedly have met with lasting success."³⁴ Teichman too had realized the historical depth of the Sino-Tibetan encounter when he wrote that "the feud between the Chinese and the people of Hsiangcheng, which had begun long before, was not to an end."³⁵ By the end of 1910, only a couple of months after Jacques Bacot had paid a visit to a relatively quiet, Chinese-occupied Sangpiling,³⁶ the neglected Chinese garrison at the monastery made common cause with the local Tibetans against the central Chinese government.³⁷ Chao again was forced to send troops to Hsiangcheng, which, with the usual severity, put an end to the rising.³⁸ Even before the 1910 mutiny, Bacot had found a Hsiangcheng district in ruins, despite signs of repopulation.³⁹ No wonder that after a second thrashing within a few years "the inhabitants of this turbulent district were more than ever irreconcilable to Chinese rule."⁴⁰ The fact that a Chinese force had taken Lhasa on 12 February of the same year, may have contributed to their stance.

But the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty was near. The revolution of 1911 meant a temporary weakening of Chinese authority and military

³⁰ Soulié 1904:92, 94.

³¹ Rock 1947:342; Sperling 1976:23.

³² Younghusband 1910:33; cf. Siguret 1937:18-22.

³³ Cf. Shelton 1923:147 ["First Chinese school – no good"].

³⁴ Mehra 1979:183.

³⁵ Teichman 1922:22; cf. Soulié 1897.

³⁶ Bacot 1912:140-151.

³⁷ Teichman 1922:30; Goré 1923:149.

³⁸ Teichman 1922:30-31; Goré 1923:149 ["Le général Fong Chan fut chargé de réprimer (la révolte de Hiang-tch'eng) et s'en acquitta à la satisfaction de son maître, en fusillant tous les soldats de la compagnie mutinée"].

³⁹ Bacot 1912:140; cf. the ruined countryside as seen by Edgar (1935:19) in Upper Hsiangcheng in 1907.

⁴⁰ Teichman 1922:31.

power. Chao Erh-feng, the 'Warden of the Marches', was treacherously murdered by Szechuan revolutionaries in December 1911, and by mid-1912, the Chinese had lost control of most of their frontier districts.⁴¹ The outlying garrisons in southern Litang and Ba had to retreat to Batang, where on two occasions they were besieged by the Tibetans, one time by troops from Lhasa, and a second time by Hsiangcheng venturers.⁴² From October 1912 onwards, Chinese republican troops tried to reestablish their military presence in the southern Kham region, especially with an eye to the strategic but vulnerable Yunnan-Burma border area further south.⁴³ In February 1913, a special army unit was sent to force Hsiangcheng to capitulate. It made slow progress, but in the end the fight against heavy odds made the rebel monks and their followers retreat across the Yunnan provincial boundary. In June 1913, the Sangpiling Monastery was reoccupied.⁴⁴ China emphasized its renewed presence in the area by explicitly stating at the Simla Conference that Batang and Litang would *not* be part of Inner Tibet but of China proper. This proposal was rejected by the British and the Tibetans, which in the end made the Chinese refuse to ratify the April 1914 Convention. In the summer of 1914, Hsiangcheng again became the scene of frontier fighting and pillaging, this time through the complex interaction between Hsiangcheng rebels and deserting soldiers under a Chinese commander.⁴⁵ The recurrent fighting in Hsiangcheng during the better part of 1914 brought new devastation to a country district already suffering from local warfare for more than eight years. Many villages and monasteries were destroyed,⁴⁶ but already one year later Dr. Shelton could report that many people were building new houses in the Hsiangcheng area,⁴⁷ possibly tempted to do so by the prevailing truce between China and Tibet after the close of the Simla Conference. But peace did not reign long in Hsiangcheng. In March 1915, the newly concocted rebel-*cum*-soldier bands even posed a threat to Tachienlu, but they were dispelled from the town by loyal Chinese

⁴¹ Teichman 1922:38; Goré 1939:163-164.

⁴² Teichman 1922:165.

⁴³ Teichman 1922:166-167.

⁴⁴ Teichman 1922:42; and especially Goré 1939:168.

⁴⁵ Shelton 1923:96; Goré 1939:175.

⁴⁶ Teichman 1922:43.

⁴⁷ Shelton 1923:149.

troops from Litang.⁴⁸ From 1915 onwards, the theatre of Sino-Tibetan frontier hostilities shifted westward towards Chamdo and northward into Kham.⁴⁹ Southern Kham, except for scattered bandit activity,⁵⁰ remained relatively peaceful. Unfortunately, civil war erupted between Szechuan and Yunnan in 1916-1917. When the Yunnanese finally had to retreat from a Szechuan-besieged Tachienlu, they did so with great difficulty through the wild mountainous country of Muli.⁵¹ The first half of 1918 saw the Tibetans regain much frontier land in Eastern Tibet, but the truce of Rongbatsa, enacted by Teichman, once more assured relative peace for a number of years.⁵² In southern Kham, however, rebellion continued to plague the Hsiangcheng district and surroundings well into the 1920s, but as the district was located at a strategic position,⁵³ it continued to enjoy China's geopolitical interest.⁵⁴

Banditry and the State

One of the most conspicuous developments in the frontier region under review is the growth of brigandage and banditry, especially after the beginning of Chao's forward policy in 1905. This is not to say that brigandage in the area did not occur before that time. Amundsen refers to the country around Chungtien (Gyethang) as a notorious robber haunt,⁵⁵ and that already so in 1899. Father J.-A. Soulié, in his description of the situation in southern Ba in 1902, mentions the robber country of 'Tomarong',⁵⁶ which is probably the same as 'Tonguarong' as marked on the map accompanying Goré's

⁴⁸ Goré 1939:175; cf. Lamb 1989:36.

⁴⁹ Teichman 1922:51-58.

⁵⁰ Handel-Mazzetti 1927:156 [Konkaling robbery in the Muli area], p.160 [Threat of Konkaling robbery along the Muli-Chungtien road, July 1915; the robbers appear to have been deserted Chinese soldiers], p.160 [Impossibility of travel in the area between Muli and Tachienlu], p.173 [Hsiangcheng robber threat against Chungtien, August 1915].

⁵¹ Teichman 1922:50.

⁵² Teichman 1922:52-58; Richardson 1984:120.

⁵³ On the one hand overlooking the main southern China-Tibet road from Tachienlu to Batang, and on the other guarding a major through-route from Batang to the Yunnan-Burmese frontier region south of Atuntze.

⁵⁴ Lamb 1989:48, note 60.

⁵⁵ Amundsen 1900:533.

⁵⁶ Soulié 1904:97.

study of the Tibetan marches of Szechuan and Yunnan.⁵⁷ Tomarong or Tonguarong probably refers to the area where the dreaded Tongwa were living,⁵⁸ which is in fact the southwestern part of Konkaling. If the terms brigandage and banditry refer to robbery in bands, in contrast to individual acts of crime committed in isolation, the question immediately arises as to what social and political circumstances gave rise to these early forms of communal robbery.

First, we may think of the social setup of many of the petty principalities and monastic estates in the Sino-Tibetan marchlands. Generally speaking, taxes were not high, but the labor corvée was more often than not a heavy burden to the local population.⁵⁹ The 'Lama Kingdom' of Muli in particular is mentioned time after time in the literature as a land of forced labor and corvée.⁶⁰ Consequently, the common people in Muli have been described as poor and oppressed.⁶¹ Under such circumstances, youngsters, in search of a better life, may have run away to known haunts of brigandage such as the neighboring district of Konkaling.

Second, and undoubtedly the more important reason even before 1905, must have been the growing pressure of Chinese administration in the areas south of Litang and Batang. As referred to in the previous section, minor Chinese officials were sometimes attached to the more important *tussu* with the object of knowing what was going on in and around the local courts.⁶² In addition, small Chinese military frontier posts were found pushing into areas of lesser control, as for example the military post at the village of Nainda, south of Litang.⁶³ But only after 1905, the year in which Chao Erh-feng started his forward policy in the marches, brigandage seems to have developed into larger-scale banditry. At first, it was primarily the monks that were hunted from their monasteries, as they were seen as the main instigators of trouble. But where opposition developed into

⁵⁷ Goré 1923, endmap.

⁵⁸ See Rock 1931:50, 64; Rock 1947:251; Siguret 1937:30; Goullart 1955:90, 94.

⁵⁹ Bodard 1921:368, but see Legendre 1913:185-186 ["Les lamas prélèvent une large dîme sur les troupeaux, sur les champs, sur tous les produits"].

⁶⁰ Soulié 1897:50; Kingdon Ward 1924:135; Rock 1925:467; Roosevelt and Roosevelt 1929:96 ["Muli is an Oriental Despotism"]; Schäfer 1933:216-217; Stevens 1934:70-71.

⁶¹ Amundsen 1900:621 ["The Milians are poor and oppressed"]; Davies 1909:233 ["Eastern Mili country is very poor"]; Rock 1925:467.

⁶² Soulié 1904:92.

⁶³ Soulié 1904:102.

full-blown revolt, the Chinese did not hesitate to burn whole villages, to destroy crops and herds, and to starve the population.⁶⁴ The result was an increased floating population which plundered for sheer survival.

Then there were the Chinese deserters. At times, whole garrisons in outlying areas were neglected and perhaps forgotten in times of political upheaval. Already in 1907, during his first journey, Bacot heard several times of soldiers in revolt.⁶⁵ Towards the end of 1910, the Chinese garrison at Sangpiling mutinied.⁶⁶ Five hundred soldiers with modern rifles murdered their officers and fled southward to the district of Chungtien in Yunnanese territory.⁶⁷ In the summer of 1914, the Austrian botanist Handel-Mazzetti, on his journey in southern Gyethang, heard a batch of Chinese deserters had attacked a Tibetan caravan.⁶⁸ With more Chinese soldiers deserting and more displaced Tibetans around, new leagues were formed, turning against provincial and central Chinese authority alike. Shelton even heard that the Hsiangcheng rebellion of 1914 stood under the command of a runaway Chinese, who with his Tibetan rebels destroyed the German-built bridge near Ho-kou on the Yalung.⁶⁹ But most bands of bandits were thoroughly Tibetan, sometimes headed by formerly high-placed persons, as in the case of Drashetsongpen, the bandit chief of Konkaling,⁷⁰ who had been a lama of Chungtien Monastery (Tsongtsanling).⁷¹

The dynamics of rebel band formation and disintegration is a little understood process. One tends to agree with E.J. Hobsbawm that how long a band lasted depended on "how tense the social situation, or how complex the international situation, was."⁷² But one also wonders whether a monopoly of force actively sustained by a local warlord of strong personality may have served the purpose of perpetuating a group of outlaws equally well. The question to be answered therefore with regard to southern Kham is why banditry in the

⁶⁴ Teichman 1922:43; Shelton 1923:96.

⁶⁵ Bacot 1912:148.

⁶⁶ Teichman 1922:30.

⁶⁷ Bacot 1912:149.

⁶⁸ [July 30 1914, near Mount Beshui]: Handel-Mazzetti 1927:82, see also p.160.

⁶⁹ Shelton 1923:96-97.

⁷⁰ Rock 1930:402, Rock 1931:18, 43, 50.

⁷¹ Rock 1931:17.

⁷² Hobsbawm 1978:19.

Konkaling and Hsiangcheng regions continued to grow in the 1920s,⁷³ despite a relatively quiet international frontier situation, as pointed out at the end of the previous section. From about 1920 onwards, frontier robbery developed into a more professional activity of greater scale, reach and ferocity. Better armed⁷⁴ and better organized, robber expeditions by hundreds of outlaws from the Hsiangcheng and especially the Konkaling area played havoc near places as far away as Tachienlu, Chungtien, and Likiang. Modern arms were increasingly carried by bandits. In fact, the advance of the Chinese military in their home areas offered an opportunity for bandits to arm themselves, by attacking and looting the garrisons and carrying off rifles, pistols, and artillery.⁷⁵ The Muli King later bought two field pieces from the outlaws.⁷⁶ According to Joseph Rock, a long-time resident in a neighboring area, and one of the very few Europeans actually to have visited the Konkaling area, arms were also *sold* by the Chinese, mainly by generals residing in the Kienchang valley at Ning-yuan fu. As they were first and foremost interested in money, old and surplus rifles went to the highest bidders. The raiding 'Lolo' (Yi) and Tibetans of the Szechuan-Yunnan border often became the happy new owners.⁷⁷ The weapons thus bought made larger-scale robbing expeditions possible, of which we have several reports.

The years 1921-1923 were bandit-ridden. In the spring of 1921, a robber band from Hsiangcheng pillaged the Minyag region east of the Yalung.⁷⁸ The next winter, a group from Hsiangcheng appeared in the Yangtse valley west of Chatring. Villages in the area were sacked, and the whole population made for the other side of the Yangtse after which the boats that had brought them across were burned. For several months people lived under arms on the west side

⁷³ Rock 1931:17-18. Cf. Kapp 1973:54.

⁷⁴ The question as to where these arms came from is worth an investigation of its own. There seems to have been an increased availability of all sorts of arms hailing from Europe after the armistice of World War One. See Jowe 1925:198. The disturbed state of China in these years with its rampant warlordism can at least be partly related to the large-scale smuggling of arms into China by several European countries. Cf. Jowe 1925; see also Ch'i 1976:116ff., 120 note [arms trade]; Chan 1982. According to Handel-Mazzetti 1927:172, arms reached the multi-ethnic fringe lands of Eastern Tibet also via Tibet.

⁷⁵ Rock 1931:14, 17.

⁷⁶ Rock 1931:14, 17.

⁷⁷ Rock in his magisterial study, 1947:251-252.

⁷⁸ Goré 1923:351.

of the river.⁷⁹ The general disturbance of the country was so great that the Dalai Lama wrote to the people of Hsiangcheng not to cause any further trouble, despite the fact that Chatring was nominally under Chinese rule.⁸⁰ In the early spring of 1922, Joseph Rock was refused a visit to the Muli King on the grounds that Hsiangcheng robbers were too numerous that year.⁸¹ Over the summer, the botanist Kingdon Ward managed to spend five months in Muli, but work was difficult, owing to "the unusually disturbed conditions of the country."⁸² In the same year, Chungtien fell to the Tongwa from Konkaling.⁸³ It had already fallen into the hands of regular Tibetan troops in 1917,⁸⁴ but had been handed over again to the Chinese in 1918. The Tongwa drove out the Chinese officials and robbed the Chinese soldiers of their rifles.⁸⁵ Then they went further southwards, into the Na-khi districts of Ha-ba and Bber-dder in the Yangtse loop, where the local population was no match for them. They proceeded to loot and burn their villages.⁸⁶ Just across the Yangtse, they destroyed the little town of Taku and terrorized its population.⁸⁷ Afterwards, they occupied the Atsanko Gorge and entrenched themselves near the village of Noyü on the west side of the Yangtse River. Regular Chinese soldiers were dispatched from Tali to chase the Tongwa with machine guns. But, according to one source, "they stood their ground and kept up their fire."⁸⁸ Towards the end of 1923, an even bigger force of Tibetan bandits crossed the Yangtse, and came to within thirty kilometers of Likiang, where the 'Battle of the Peshwe Bridge' was fought, apparently killing many Chinese soldiers.⁸⁹

It should come as no surprise that trade under such disturbed conditions suffered accordingly. In the early years, the little trading,

⁷⁹ Goré 1923:369-370.

⁸⁰ Richardson 1998.

⁸¹ Rock 1925:447.

⁸² Gregory and Gregory 1923:241.

⁸³ Rock 1947:251, 257.

⁸⁴ Kingdon Ward 1923:29.

⁸⁵ Rock 1947:257.

⁸⁶ Rock 1947:250.

⁸⁷ Rock 1947:251.

⁸⁸ Rock 1947:257.

⁸⁹ Rock 1925:453; to what extent the perhaps hyperbolic number of 1200 Tibetans is true, of which reportedly only one was killed, remains a problem.

consisting of wool, pottery, and locks,⁹⁰ that was done by the Hsiangcheng themselves was effected at the market of Ho Chu and respected by both Chinese and Tibetans.⁹¹ However, long-distance trade passing through and along the outskirts of the troubled region, especially during the disturbed years of 1910-1917, received a severe blow.⁹² Long-distance trade, which passed through the area immediately to the south, as was for instance the case along the Tachienlu-Muli-Likiang and the Muli-Chungtien roads, remained threatened for many years to come. After the difficult 1921-23 years, banditry, although by no means subsided, occasionally appears to have been low enough to let some traffic pass, but the roads remained insecure.⁹³ Finally Joseph Rock was officially invited by the King of Muli; on his way to the 'Land of the Lamas' he met a Tibetan caravan from Tachienlu, and was told that the road ahead was free of brigands and that he had nothing to fear.⁹⁴

This was not so in Gyethang and the Likiang area, where the Tongwa, who had taken Chungtien in 1922, went on the rampage again. At first united under a Chinese commander (1924), they proceeded to Yungbe to chase rebellious 'Lolo' (Yi) from the area, but afterwards bolted and went on the warpath for themselves. They crossed the Yangtse to Hoking, south of Likiang, where they beat the local militia. In the end they reached Cheku, a small trading town not far from Likiang. It was severely looted and burned, and its population terrorized.⁹⁵ The next year, a couple of hundred Chungtien Tibetans devastated the Chinese village of Wuchou in the Yangtse valley,⁹⁶ and in mid-October 1926, a mixed band of Hsiangcheng and Tongwa, about 600 strong, again crossed the Yangtse and destroyed the village of Kiu-tien.⁹⁷

The Hsiangcheng remained a serious threat to the Batang-Litang road too. In 1927, two hundred Hsiangcheng ambushed a hundred

⁹⁰ Duncan 1952:129.

⁹¹ As Edgar (1935:14) has observed, "Ho Chu, always loyal to China, was apparently also scrupulously fair to Hsiangcheng, and when the crisis came (Sangpiling 1905-1906) her neutrality was respected by both."

⁹² Edgar 1930-1931:6-7.

⁹³ Siguret 1937:30.

⁹⁴ Rock 1947:455.

⁹⁵ Siguret 1937:29; cf. Rock 1947:251.

⁹⁶ Siguret 1937:29.

⁹⁷ Siguret 1937:30.

Chinese soldiers and slaughtered over twenty of them.⁹⁸ Rock, on his visit to the mountains of Konkaling in 1928, was warned by the King of Muli *not* to visit the monastery of Konkaling proper, as its 400 monks were always on the alert to rob.⁹⁹ On his visit to the Minya Konka area in early spring 1929, he was informed at the village of Mudju that the bandit chief of Konkaling, Drashetsongpen, had arrived at the Yalung with his 'horde' of 800 outlaws.¹⁰⁰ On that river, the ferry and rope bridges near the large village of Baurong had always been of strategic importance, and, next to their agriculture, the local population could make some extra money in helping parties cross the river. Johnston, on his journey in 1906, described the place as relatively large and prosperous, though vulnerable to mountain robbers.¹⁰¹ But in the 1920s, it became a consistent target of Konkaling robbers, until it was found by Rock to have been reduced to a heap of ruins when he visited the place in the spring of 1929.¹⁰² Other travelers too have commented on Baurong's wretched appearance.¹⁰³ The village of Gendschü, on the opposite side of the river, was generally spared because it was in Muli territory, and as the outlaws were on friendly terms with the Muli King, it was passed by. Baurong, on the other side, however, was considered Chinese territory, as indeed was the Minyag region.¹⁰⁴ Chungtien was again occupied by the Tongwa in 1933, from which place they raided surrounding areas.¹⁰⁵ Only one year later, the Muli King was murdered on 10 September 1934,¹⁰⁶ not by Hsiangcheng or Konkaling outlaws, but by a Chinese militarist, bent on the gold of Muli. That was a sure loss to the stability of the area, as the Chinese knew very well; by allowing the Lama-King to continue to rule, they could keep the Konkaling robbers at bay.¹⁰⁷ By the late 1930s, the situation had not

⁹⁸ Duncan 1952:105.

⁹⁹ Rock 1931:27.

¹⁰⁰ Rock 1930:411 [The Minya Tibetans had been the victim of Konkaling robbery several times, but they had now armed themselves and were prepared to make a fight].

¹⁰¹ Johnston 1908:181-182.

¹⁰² Rock 1930:435.

¹⁰³ Schäfer 1933:209 ["Baurong ist ein fürchterlich ärmliches Drecknest"]; Potts 1940:222 ["Baurong was a rather decrepit place"].

¹⁰⁴ Rock 1930:435.

¹⁰⁵ Rock 1947:251.

¹⁰⁶ Rock 1947:357.

¹⁰⁷ Weigold 1935:390 ["Das war kluge Taktik auf beiden Seiten"].

improved, travel in the country being regarded as far from safe. The American Potts, who traveled through Muli in 1938, was accompanied by two Chinese gun-runners with a number of Mauser pistols, and seven young monks on pilgrimage to Lhasa, all armed with long lances.¹⁰⁸ He ended up in Yungning, where the abbot of the local monastery showed him his collection of loaded firearms, including Brownings, Mausers, and a magazine shotgun of Belgian manufacture.¹⁰⁹

From the above section it is easy to see that southern Kham between the Yangtse and the Yalung was for decades an utterly disturbed country with an unusually unruly population. According to the King of Muli, the Chinese were solely to blame for the current state of affairs.¹¹⁰ They had destroyed a Tibetan administrative setup, in which the districts of Hsiangcheng and Konkaling were subject to the princely state of Litang, but by their haughty imperialistic policies had failed to establish an accepted authoritative administration. It seems all very clear: before Chao's advent *peace* was the prevailing mode, and afterwards there was *anarchy*.¹¹¹ Or is it that clear after all? By way of conclusion, I will now try to shed a more multi-dimensional light on this vexed problem of frontier agitation.

Into the Deep

The history of events, which may refer in a Tibetan application to the siege of Sangpiling, the truce of Rongbatsa, or to the murder of the Muli King, is regarded by historians of more structuralist persuasion as rather superficial. The latter believe in deeper levels of historical understanding, showing the explanatory power of slowly changing social and economic structures, or even the semi-permanent structures of a particular geographical milieu in which human action takes shape.¹¹²

Geographically speaking, the districts of Chatring, Mili, and Gye-thang are located at a major ecological divide, where the higher pla-

¹⁰⁸ Potts 1940:224.

¹⁰⁹ Potts 1940:231.

¹¹⁰ Rock 1931:14.

¹¹¹ Rock 1931:14.

¹¹² For an application of Braudel's ideas within a Tibetan setting, see van Spengen 2000.

teau lands of the north slowly give way to the more subtropical plains and river valleys of the south. Without wanting to be deterministic, and only speaking history-wise, Tibetan civilization has always been associated with upland areas, well above and beyond warmer climes. Kingdon Ward once even stated that the frontier of Tibetan civilization is the verge of the grassland and the fringe of the pine forest. If a Tibetan crosses this barrier, he must revolutionize its life.¹¹³ For all its deterministic overtones, this observation seems important to me, because it implies that there is a major ecological divide in southern Kham, which historically speaking separated peoples of different material culture.¹¹⁴ It was a world of limited circulation, and its frontier inhabitants had only intermittent contacts. It is my argument that, speaking for the southern Kham region, we have so far insufficiently taken into account the historical effects of this deep-seated north-south ecological frontier divide.

As a corollary to this ecological frontier there is a long-standing cultural frontier as well. This is the one between Tibetan ethnic groupings and Tibeto-Burman ones, interspersed with pockets of so-called 'Hsifan', a term which as far as I have been able to ascertain, refers to all shades of Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman *métissage*. This cultural frontier should not be conceived of as a fixed geometrical line, but as a transitional zone, in which Tibetan, Hsifan and Tibeto-Burman villages were coexistent at different altitudes in the deeply eroded river valleys of southern Kham. At the same time, groups found it sometimes expedient to shift their local ethnic identity when opportune. Nevertheless, such a cultural-ecological frontier, under certain historical circumstances, could assume the character of a political border. This may already have been the case in Nan-chao times, when the latter kingdom contested a border zone in northern Yunnan with the Old Tibetan Empire.¹¹⁵ Many centuries later, the

¹¹³ Kingdon Ward 1932:469.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Jeffrey 1974:60: "Geographically speaking, we may consider that the people of Muli, Hsiangcheng, and Konkaling occupy a region where the shallow grassland valleys of the Tibetan plateaux of the North, are beginning to cut deeper and deeper, until on the South at lower altitudes they form the deeply cut valleys of Yunnan. The people are farmers and housedwellers."

¹¹⁵ Cf. Backus 1981:40-45, 52-63, 69-100. See also Rock 1963:13 ["In A.D. 755, the territory was captured by the Tibetans, but afterwards it became part of the Nan-chao kingdom. There seem to have been many skirmishes between the various tribes and the land changed hands for short periods"].

'Ancient Nakhi Kingdom', centering on the Likiang area, reached its greatest power around the year 1600.¹¹⁶ It offered shelter to fugitive Karmapa Lamas from Tibet, who were under pressure from the Gelukpa. In neighboring Muli too, the power of Karmapa monasteries was being curtailed.¹¹⁷ At that time, however, the Nakhi Mu kings felt strong enough to make incursions *into* Tibetan territory, and as a result there was recurrent fighting on the southern Kham cultural-ecological frontier. It made the Tibetans build watch and defense towers all along a line crossing southern Kham from east to west, separating the Tibetans from the Tibeto-Burmans.¹¹⁸ The seventeenth century saw a major eastward expansion of Central Tibetan authority into Kham under the fifth Dalai Lama.¹¹⁹ In the wake of Gushri Khan's military exploits, several administrative functionaries were appointed and many Gelukpa monasteries founded by the Central Tibetan administration, sometimes literally on the ruins of Nyingma and Kadgyu ones. An example is the Galdan Sumtsen Ling Monastery in the Gyethang area.¹²⁰

Historically speaking, there seems to have been a lot of strife in southern Kham, pre-dating the Chinese-Tibetan encounter of late Ch'ing and early republican times. One wonders how socially and economically stable these multi-ethnic fringe lands on both sides of the cultural-ecological boundary in fact were, and whether the local populations were able to establish some permanency of existence and social integration over the years in these apparently war-torn frontier lands. In this connection, perhaps the greatest tragedy that befell the southern Kham region was *not* to have profited from a stable central political administration at any time during its centuries-long history. The Sino-Tibetan border of 1727, which brought territory east of the Yangtse under nominal Chinese control, did in fact create another political-territorial vacuum, in which neither the Chinese nor the

¹¹⁶ Rock 1947; see also Jackson 1979:9-22, 275-296.

¹¹⁷ Dorje 1996:192.

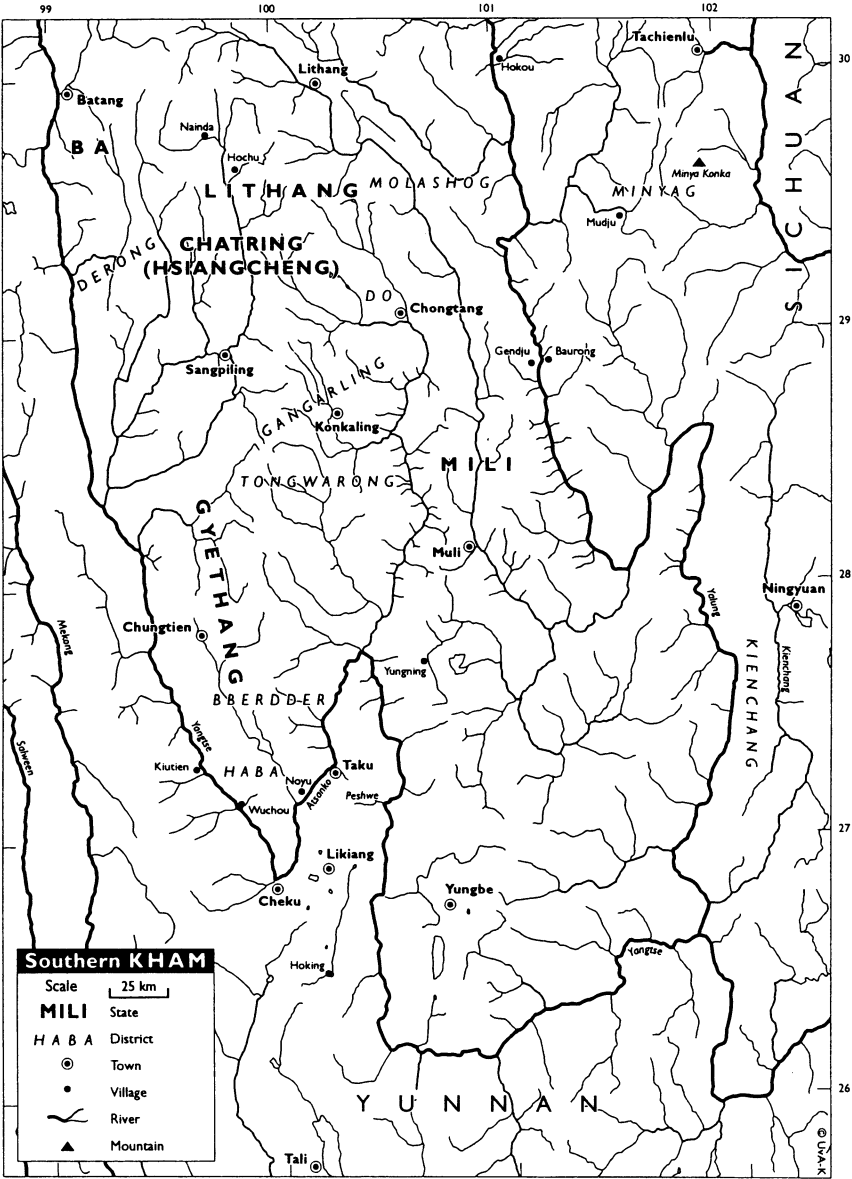
¹¹⁸ Rock 1947:318 ["These towers are common north in Muli, on the Zho Chu, on the hills in the Litang valley, on the Yalung, and in the region of Chiu-lung hsien, south of Tachienlu. They form in fact, an ethnic boundary line from the Mekong to the Tatu Ho"], see also plate 169, facing p.330; cf. Johnston 1908:197; Legendre 1913:236-237; Handel-Mazzetti 1927:155; Roosevelt and Roosevelt 1929:117-119 (see photo of Chiulung facing p.116); Rock 1930:401; Schäfer 1933:207.

¹¹⁹ See in particular Ahmad 1970.

¹²⁰ Ahmad 1970:221.

Central Tibetan polity had much influence. From a structuralist historian's point of view, it is the combination of—historically speaking—an unstable *cultural-ecological* frontier with—administratively speaking—a non-effective *geopolitical* frontier that in the final analysis may contribute to an explanation of strife and lawlessness in the southern Kham districts of Hsiangcheng and Konkaling. In the light of such a perspective, the 'event' of the siege of Sangpiling fades in importance, and even Chao's forward policy after 1905 loses in explanatory power. In this connection, one would also like to know more about the nineteenth century: How stable was socio-economic development in the area at the time, were there conditions of lawlessness, were there perhaps outlaws or bandits already? There are some indications that there were.¹²¹ We also need to know more about the dynamics of *tussu* rule, as a link between the peasantry and Empire. These are but a few examples of historical conceptualization within a wider structuralist perspective. It shows that the bare historical event may be better understood within a more elaborate analytical framework combining geographical, political and cultural factors. Perhaps such an added perspective will give us a sounder understanding of frontier history at large.

¹²¹ Soulié 1897:55; Soulié 1904:97.



Southern Khams

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