

Hsiao-ting Lin, *Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers:  
A Journey to the West*

Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011. xxx+192 pp.

Joseph Lawson\*

For those interested in tracing the origins of contemporary Chinese rule in Tibetan, Turkic and Mongol regions, the Republican period (1912-1949) can seem like a messy interlude. As James Millward and others have shown, the Qing idea of empire as a polity containing multiple ethnic jurisdictions died before the end of the Qing. But it was not until the Communist victory that any Chinese government had the capacity to mount a sustained attempt to politically and culturally integrate all non-Han territory into the new Chinese nation state. Yet in the last seven years, several scholars have produced important work demonstrating that many later developments had their origins in the era between Qing imperialism and Communist rule. Gray Tuttle has shown that the religious links between China and Tibet formed during the Republican period resulted in connections that could be exploited by the Communists. James Leibold has traced the development of the idea of a unified Chinese nationality, inclusive of non-Han peoples, and Thomas Mullaney has demonstrated the importance of Republican era social science for the Communist ethnic classification project.

---

\* 中央研究院近代史研究所博士後

With *Modern China's Ethnic Frontiers*, Hsiao-ting Lin cements his position among such scholars. The book builds on Lin's previous work on the Nationalist regime and Tibet, broadening the focus to deliver a succinct account of the party's engagement with Xinjiang, and the Mongol and Tibetan lands. The argument, similar to that in *Tibet and Nationalist China's Frontier*, is that the Nationalist party did not have a well thought-out set of ideas for engaging with non-Han leaders, or administering their territories. Overall, the party's policy here was shaped more by strategic concerns in China proper—during the struggle against regional militarists, the Communist Party, and Japan—than it was by ideological prescription. Opportunism and the absence of a consistent, developed plan characterized the regime's approach until its defeat. This argument is developed mostly using Nationalist government documents held in Taipei archives, British diplomatic records in the Oriental and India Office collections in London, and the holdings of the Hoover Institution (principally, Chiang Kai-shek's diary).

The book begins with the fall of the Qing and ends with the fall of the Nationalists. Through a succession of strategic challenges, Lin shows how the party made friends and enemies among frontier leaders as the situation demanded. In 1918, Sun Yat-sen offered to accept Japanese occupation of Manchuria and eastern Mongolia in exchange for support. In 1924, it was the Mongols themselves whom Sun was wooing, with offers of “self-determination” (*ziju*) and “self-government” (*zizhi*). During the Northern Expedition, Chiang Kai-shek rewarded the northern militarists who were the chief exponents of colonization of Mongol land by creating new provinces (Suiyuan and Chahar) for them to be governors of (p. 19). In 1930, the Nationalists needed the Mongols' aid again against the same governors; so the Mongol nobles were given the right to organize their own militias, and promised that Chinese would not settle on their lands (p. 23). With the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, and attacks on Shanghai in 1932, Nanjing looked perilously close to the

enemy; so the Nationalists sought a new territorial base in the Northwest. In 1933, Chiang Kai-shek moved troops into southern Gansu, and dispatched Luo Wen'gan to Xinjiang to build alliances with opponents of the Xinjiang military leader Sheng Shicai (pp. 38, 41). In the early years of the War of Resistance, the Soviet Union was China's only source of outside support; so the regime sought to build relationships with, and control over, the Tibetan Buddhist lamaseries in Qinghai, Xikang and Gansu, in order to protect the transport routes between the USSR and China proper.

Given Lin's stress on the importance of military-strategic concerns in policy making, at some points the reader is left wishing there was more information on how the Nationalists decided on what their strategic interests were, or whether there was ever any disagreement among the Nationalist leadership. Why did the Nationalists cooperate with some frontier governors, and work to undermine others? In some cases, the military importance of a certain course of action is clear. In other cases it is less so. In the 1930s and 1940s, the "Northwest" was a large and amorphous region that could encompass provinces like Shaanxi, Ningxia, Gansu, as well as Xinjiang. How and why did particular places within this enormous territory become strategic priorities? What exactly was the Nationalists' strategic interest in Xinjiang in particular (as opposed to the Northwest in general) before 1937? Was Chiang already counting on Soviet aid coming via the territory? Soviet aid to China ceased with the onset of war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, so was there any tactical reason for Nationalist leaders to continue to be so strongly engaged with Xinjiang—why, for example, did Sheng Shicai get US\$100,000 in 1942 from a Nationalist regime facing financial crisis? (p. 75).

The answer to this is probably that ideology did matter in some way. After all, as Lin notes, the party aimed to build "a Han-dominated, twentieth-century nationalist party-state" (p. 81). Hence, in the somewhat hurried epilogue, Lin leaves the reader

with “the ethnopolitics in the Nationalist era was like a pendulum that swung between idealism and pragmatism”. But there is very little analysis of the idealistic swings of the pendulum here, and Lin does not develop a strong analysis of the interaction of ideology and pragmatism. As the mere existence of the two is not a very surprising find in a government policy, the conclusion seems somewhat lacking in depth and specificity.

More analysis here might have important implications for the field. Stevan Harrell’s account of the transformation of multi-ethnic empire into nation-state focuses on the ideological transitions (*Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China*, pp. 21-32). Acceptance of a plurality of legal systems and culture gave way to attempts to construct unity. This narrative does not leave much room for the impact of events such as World War Two, or the Nationalists’ conflict with regional militarists. Lin’s work might contribute to an important corrective to a story in which changes in governance are more often framed in terms of an empire-to-nation shift, than the result of contingencies like war. When future historians write new and more comprehensive accounts of the consolidation of Chinese rule in Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia over the twentieth century they would do well to remember the importance of war, as well as ideology, in shaping in the policies and relationships bequeathed to the Communists, and Lin’s book will be of considerable use to them.