

A Warlord Frontier: The Yunnan-Burma Border Dispute, 1910-1937

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The Yunnan-Burma boundary dispute along China's southwestern frontier emerged in the late nineteenth century due to conflicting conceptions of national boundaries and was reignited in the 1920s as a result of the assertion of provincial militarism, more commonly known as warlordism. British and Qing Chinese officials in the late nineteenth century partially demarcated the border, though two sections, one in the north and one in the south, remained unresolved. The northern section of the disputed boundary gained prominence in 1910 when the British Burma government forcibly seized and held the Pianma region. The southern section of the frontier remained quiet until the late 1920s, when the actions of the Yunnan provincial government, under Governor Long Yun, announced an assertive frontier policy aimed at settling the disputed frontier and securing mineral resources in the region.

The Pianma Incident of 1910 brought into sharp contrast the fundamentally different conceptions of the frontier held by Chinese and British authorities. British officials demanded a "hard" boundary based on immutable geographical features and conforming to Western-derived principles of exclusive sovereignty and territorial integrity. This conception of the frontier departed significantly from that held by the Qing dynasty. Qing officials recognized historical and political contacts, ambiguous territorial definition dependent upon fluctuating local, native chieftains' authority and predicated on a slow process of acculturation and eventual absorption of these native chieftains and their populations into the formal Qing imperial administration.¹

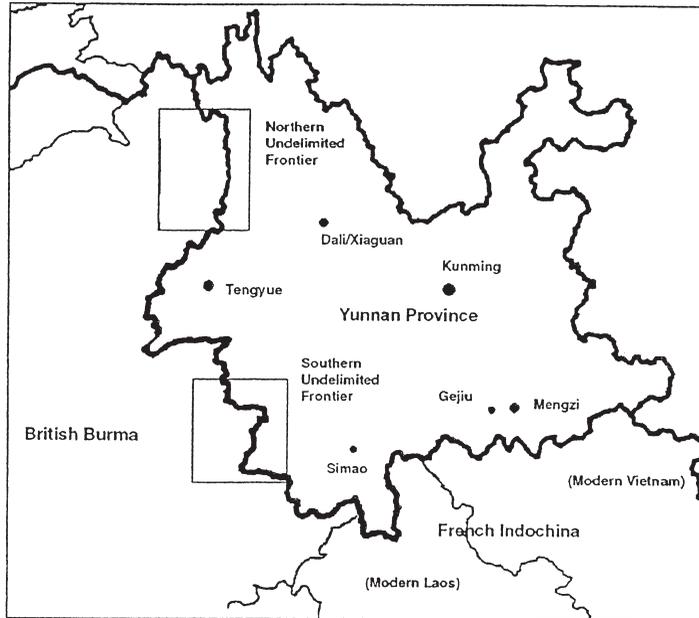
The Pianma incident occurred in the waning days of the Qing Dynasty and was one of the first and most important foreign relations issues to confront Cai E, the newly appointed Governor of Yunnan (1911-1913) in the freshly established Republic of China. As the provincial governor, Cai had to treat this matter with great delicacy as it aroused considerable outrage among the people of Yunnan. Thus, Cai's handling of the frontier dispute stressed national interests, not provincial interests, and his desire to balance the stability of the new republic and protect against further British encroachment. Cai E's conciliatory approach to British occupation of the

frontier stands in stark contrast to the aggressive approach of his successor, Long Yun.

Governor Long Yun ruled Yunnan (1927-1945) as an autonomous province within the framework of a politically divided China. Long accepted little or no input from the Nationalist Government (1927-1949) headed by Chiang Kai-shek and based in Nanjing. This was still a period of warlordism, where regional or provincial militarists struggled to retain some measure of autonomy from central government authority. In Long's case, he pledged his loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist government, provided Chiang did not interfere in his running of the province. In fact, Chiang, from his base of power in central and eastern China, had little influence over many peripheral regions of China, including Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi, Manchuria and Xinjiang. Thus, Long's approach to frontier matters reflects the nature of the times and his consistent efforts to secure assets that would continue to preserve his independence from the central government.

Beginning in the late 1920s, Long's provincial government attempted to secure potentially valuable silver mines in the disputed section of the southern boundary. Long's actions once again brought the unresolved state of the Yunnan-Burma frontier to national and international attention, but it was the provincial government that took the lead. Long's administration created a coherent and sophisticated southwestern frontier policy claiming the disputed section on behalf of the nation, though if successful, it would be the provincial government alone that would benefit and Long's ability to retain political and economic self-sufficiency would be further enhanced. Even after British occupation of the disputed silver mines in 1934, Long continued to press for his position through international arbitration.

Finally, Long Yun's handling of the frontier dispute highlights provincial militarists' involvement with foreign relations, an area that the study of warlordism in China has largely neglected. Generally, warlords have been blamed for conspiring with foreign imperialism to weaken and divide China and that remote warlords had no contact with foreign powers.² However, as this article argues, both Cai E and Long Yun were involved in foreign relations but their attitudes and actions varied on account of their political views and historical context. And, as the case of Long Yun and the southern frontier demonstrates, provincial militarists, acting independently of the prevailing Chinese national government, did indeed maintain extensive contact with foreign powers, and when it suited his purposes, actively opposed western encroachment.



Map 1. Yunnan-Burma border showing undelimited sections of the frontier, 1885-1937.

Differing conceptions of the frontier and the Pianma Incident

The China-Burma frontier emerged as an issue in Sino-British relations after the British annexation of Upper Burma in 1886. Following annexation, British territorial claims were based on information provided by officials of the former Burmese kingdom. The territories identified by these Burmese officials included states that had previously only paid nominal tribute to Burmese kings.³ Thus, British conceptions of Burma's territorial expanse led to a reconstruction of Burma inconsistent with past territorial holdings. In effect, the British claimed all territories once belonging to the Burmese dynasties, but added, as the historian Alastair Lamb has noted, "all sorts of bits and pieces which it is extremely unlikely it had ever held before with any firmness."⁴ The territories added in the north included the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River, and the upper valleys of the Salween, Mekong and Yangzi rivers. Sparsely populated by numerous distinct indigenous communities, including Shans, Kachins, Chins, and Lashis, pre-colonial Burmese influence did not likely penetrate here. These indigenous groups, who undoubtedly, periodically acknowledged Burmese overlordship when it was powerful, were functionally independent of Burmese dynastic control.⁵

Repeated negotiations conducted between British and Qing Chinese officials in the 1890s and early 1900s failed to resolve the complete shape of the border. The Burma Convention of 1894 laid the foundation for the main line of the China-Burma border, but by 1910, two distinct regions, one in the north and one in the south, were still undelimited between these two empires.

The two regions remained unresolved due to the fundamentally different conceptions regarding the formation of a national boundary. The Qing empire based their imperial claims on historical relationships and political suzerainty of native chieftains while the British favored geographical features and exclusive sovereignty.⁶ Unlike the British who demanded a single, inflexible boundary line, Qing China along its southwestern frontier accepted frontiers or borders that were zonal and flexible in nature.

British governments required a “hard” boundary based on exclusive sovereignty.⁷ This boundary was by its nature linear and bounded the limits of national, territorial sovereignty. British officials stressed the demarcation of boundaries along easily recognizable natural geographical features that were immutable. Along the Yunnan-Burma frontier, they often selected high mountain ranges or major rivers. British frontier officials avoided smaller rivers that might change course or boundary lines that traversed multiple geographical features. However, the British conception of the hard boundary conflicted with local historical practice.

By contrast, the Qing frontier was based upon the native chieftain system (*tusi zhidu*). This institution originated during the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644) to extend state control over the non-Han, ethnic populations along the Ming’s expansive frontier. The system was carried over by the Qing and during the dynasty underwent periodic reforms. However, the basic structure and function of the system remained consistent: to provide a buffer of indigenous chieftains between bureaucratically administered Chinese units and foreign domains.

The relationship between the *tusi* and the Qing state were clearly stipulated. Native chieftains were required to undertake periodic tribute missions, pay a nominal tax, and enter into a mutual responsibility arrangement with neighboring native chieftains, similar to the *baojia* institution in China proper. In return, the Chinese state granted the *tusi* a hereditary title and certificate recognizing his domain and a seal of office. Furthermore, during the Qing dynasty, officials demanded native chieftains acquire a Chinese

elementary education. These reforms signaled a tighter control over these native chieftains, and served to bind them tighter to the state and make them a conduit for Chinese cultural institutions to penetrate and transform frontier societies.⁸

The final phase of this transformative process envisioned the conversion of *tusi* rule to formal bureaucratic administration. When a native chieftain's domain had been sufficiently transformed through cultural assimilation and increased Han Chinese settlement, the Qing state would abolish the *tusi*'s position and replace him with a regularly appointed Chinese official. This process had been part of the original Ming system and comprised the historical process of expansion and consolidation along the frontier. During the Qing, it was widely practiced as frontier regions were under Chinese political and cultural influence for longer periods of time and experienced a significant upsurge in Han immigration.⁹

The buffer states ruled by local *tusi* were generally ambiguous in territorial domain. The *tusi*'s domain, confirmed by Qing investiture, was contingent upon his capacity and willingness to enforce his authority over more remote portions of his lands. Thus, Qing territorial sovereignty fluctuated to some extent with the strength of hereditary *tusi* leaders. In the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, Qing officials based their frontier claims on historical precedents and recognized suzerainty within the *tusi* system.

After years of protracted negotiations to settle the undelimited northern section of the frontier, the British government in Burma dispatched the Pianma¹⁰ Expedition to secure the British-claimed watershed boundary on 5 December 1910. This British response was precipitated by news of the Denggeng *tusi*'s attempt to collect lapsed taxes and duties from the residents of the Pianma region. This cluster of villages was situated on the western side of the watershed boundary claimed by the British. The Denggeng *tusi*, who resided on the eastern side of the watershed, claimed jurisdiction over Pianma and neighboring villages since the investiture of the first Denggeng *tusi* during the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor (r. 1723-35). In 1910, he was simply asserting his authority over his Qing-conferred domain. The villagers, who had not paid taxes in years to previous Denggeng *tusi*, resisted his tax collectors and then appealed for outside help.¹¹ British officials feared that a new, assertive Qing frontier policy would leave the watershed in Chinese hands. Therefore, the decision was made to send an armed expedition to secure the British claim and exclude all evidence of Chinese claims and presence.

The objectives of this civil-military Pianma expedition were defined as:

to bring under direct administration the country between the N'Maikha and the watershed between that river and the Shweli and Salween as far as latitude 26° 15', or thereabouts, including the villages on both sides of and in the valley of the Ngawchang Kha and its junction with the N'Maikha, to nullify the recent attempts by the Chief of Teng Keng [Denggeng] to establish his authority over villages in British territory, and to effect the removal from the tract in question of all traces of occupation on behalf of China.¹²

In order to meet these objectives, the officer in charge, W. A. Hertz, Deputy Commissioner of the Myitkyina District, was to undertake the following specific actions: 1) to visit as many villages as possible and issue "appointment orders" to village headmen, 2) to settle any disputes between different villages and levy a "nominal tribute"; and 3) to destroy a boundary pillar erected by the Chinese in 1907. The officer in charge was also to inform every local village that "they will henceforth be under British rule, and that they are entitled to British protection, and will pay tribute."¹³

The Pianma Expedition achieved its objective. It secured the frontier declared by British officials and obliterated all vestiges of Qing presence. Yet, the text of the mission and the evidence of taxation, Chinese education, and informal administration, reported by Hertz amply demonstrated that Pianma and several of the village clusters along the frontier were already under *tusi* administration and thus comprised part of China, when seen from the Chinese perspective or understood in light of China's long-standing frontier acculturation policy. Hertz, in his later reports, admitted that the Chinese claim was "not a very strong one, yet it is stronger than ours, for we have none. . . ." ¹⁴ However, once occupied and under British administrative control, the British government adamantly refused to relinquish their claim for the sake of "prestige."

Governor Cai E and the Pianma Incident

After the Revolution of 1911, which ended the Qing dynasty and inaugurated the Republic of China, the new military governor, Cai E, the first of Yunnan's provincial military governors, found himself embroiled in the Pianma dispute. While his Qing predecessor Governor-General Li Jingxi had had to contend with the initial British expedition to Pianma, Cai confronted

a settled British presence after the British had built a fort to secure their hold on the area. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the revolution, he had lost control of the military forces in the west. To deal with this situation, Cai worked to gain a firm measure of control over domestic issues by restoring provincial authority, securing the success of the revolution in neighboring Sichuan and Guizhou provinces, and pursuing a foreign policy designed to ease international tension.

In the foreign policy realm, Cai foresaw the need to maintain a peaceful relationship with Great Britain at this critical juncture for the newly founded Republic of China. Rather than antagonize British opinion, he sought to defuse potentially damaging occurrences. Immediately after taking over as military governor, Cai warned the British consul in Kunming of potential disturbances along the frontier due to disbanded soldiers or bandits. He urged Burmese authorities to be vigilant and prevent these soldiers or bandits from crossing into Burmese territory and aggravating already tense relations.¹⁵ Cai carefully pursued a conciliatory policy with the British regarding the frontier.

This conciliatory policy may have concealed a deeper interest on Cai's part to extend the Chinese frontier into Burma and Indochina. When a Yunnanese newspaper reported Cai's remarks to soldiers of his heart's desire to someday liberate Indochina and Burma, he was compelled to issue denials and shut down the offending newspaper.¹⁶

Cai may have harbored a desire to pursue a more aggressive frontier policy, yet, in China's current unstable situation, he wisely chose to take a more diplomatic course in his dealings with Great Britain.

With regard to the undelimited frontier and the Pianma incident, Cai, like his predecessors, consistently lacked clear information about the area and British activities. To remedy this lapse, he ordered Yang Jindong, the frontier official assigned to Tengyue along the Burma-Yunnan border, to gather information on British activities and the frontier situation. Yang visited the frontier in November 1912 and reported back to Cai that the British were engaged in building support facilities, such as storehouses and access roads on their side of the frontier, for their activities around Pianma. Even though these actions were provocative, Cai urged restraint in his reports to the Republic's new Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Waijiaobu*).¹⁷

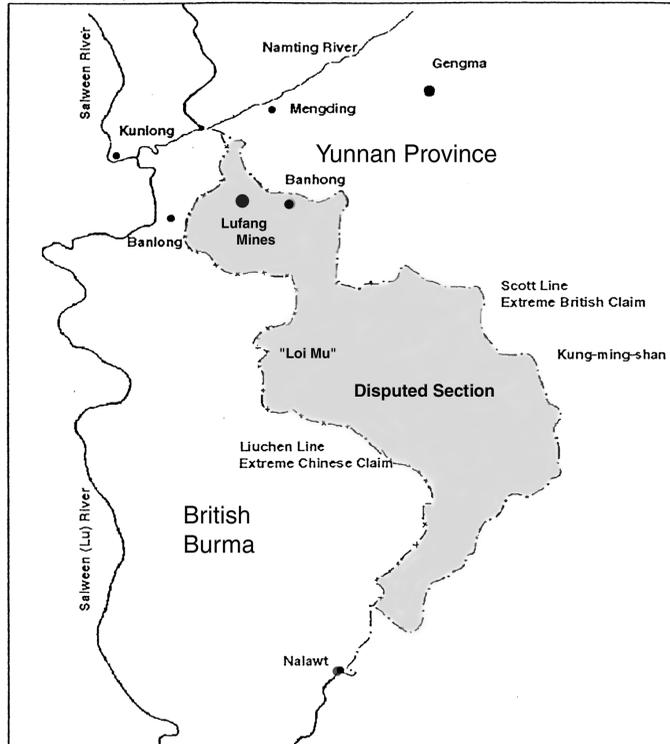
In these reports, Governor Cai urged the Republic's Ministry of For-

eign Affairs to take specific diplomatic actions. He believed that the central government must negotiate strenuously and immediately with the British in order to settle the undelimited border.¹⁸

He warned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the matter needed to be settled through a joint border survey mission thereby providing reliable results to both nations.¹⁹

In his reports, Cai also noted that British actions benefited from Chinese domestic turmoil. In his February 1913 report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Cai accurately noted that the British were taking advantage of China's recent revolution and incomplete transition into a republic and staking claims to border areas.²⁰

Sir John Jordan, the British Minister to China, had indeed urged the British government to act in order to take advantage of the recent turmoil in China.²¹ These territorial acquisitions urged by Jordan presented a threat to China's sovereignty. Yet, Cai did not urge military action. Rather, he supported a cautious approach to foreign affairs and preferred an amicable, negotiated settlement to the Pianma incident carried out by national governments. Cai E's provincial government restricted its response to diplomatic protests through the national government, limited local protests, and attempts to nonviolently interfere with British expeditions. Once established along the watershed boundary, the British were unwilling to negotiate a compromise and the Chinese were unable to compel the British to pull back or come to the negotiating table. Thus for the next two decades, Pianma became a rallying cry to denounce British imperialism and foreign encroachment in Yunnan but no resolution to the outstanding boundary disputes were forthcoming.



Map 2. Southern Undelimited frontier showing disputed section between extreme boundary claims.

Governor Long Yun and the Southern Disputed Frontier

The Yunnan-Burma southern undelimited boundary dispute grew out of the same failed late Qing boundary negotiations and flawed Burma Convention of 1894 as the northern dispute. The text outlined the proposed southern boundary section along both geographical and political criteria. In some areas, a physical feature, such as the “very lofty mountain range” Kung-ming-shan²² was to form the border, while in other areas, it was the political integrity of local *tusis*’ domains. To further complicate the matter, the convention utilized phrases such as “which are locally well known,” when referring to geographical features. This catch phrase may well have had some validity for the local inhabitants, but proved extremely difficult to identify or delimit for outsiders with very limited information and no practical experience.²³

The result was the creation of a disputed zone or “No Man’s Land”²⁴ between the two extreme boundary claims held by China and Great Britain. This territory, named after the largest ethnic group in the area, was known collectively as the Wa States in Burma and as the Kawa Hills (*Kawa Shan*) in China. Among the British, the head-hunting Was were identified as “Wild Was,” while the non-headhunting branch was known as “Tame Was.”²⁵ In Chinese, the distinction was retained with reference to the Kawa, who took heads and the Lawa, who did not. The Chinese further distinguished between the social and cultural practices of the two groups. Besides not being headhunters, the Lawa were perceived as culturally superior to the Kawa, having a higher standard of living and practicing Buddhism.²⁶

The “Wild Was” still regularly practiced headhunting into the 1930s among their fellow “Wild Was,” as well as nearby “Tame Was,” other local ethnic communities, Chinese, and even the occasional British official.²⁷ Though Wa headhunting was greatly feared, the practice gained some respect in British accounts for its orderliness and practicality.

The most renowned custom of the Wild Wa is that of headhunting. Heads are liable to be taken at any time but there is a recognized season which opens in March and lasts for three months. Head taking is regarded as a religious duty and not an exhibition of ferocity or a depraved habit. Heads are needed to protect the homestead, to ensure good crops and to stop the pressure from foreigners which has, in the past deprived them of so much land. If at least one is not procured annually for each village, disaster is expected to follow. If more heads than are deemed necessary are obtained, the excess is sold to the less adventurous villages, for a head is a head no matter where or how procured. Some heads are believed to be more efficacious than others and are priced accordingly. Chinese are preferred, then Shans and then the hill races. Long haired heads are liked since “Hairs of head long, ears of corn likewise.”²⁸

These “Wild Was” resided deeper within the Wa States in villages constructed “on the crest of a hill from which they can command the approaches on every side.”²⁹ These hill villages were formidably defended by thick earthen ramparts, deep ditches, and long crooked entrance tunnels.³⁰ They were fiercely independent and challenged anyone who entered their territory. As a result, neither government was interested in imposing a costly and difficult administrative presence over a disputed frontier region.

The southern border dispute garnered little attention from either side until the late 1920s. While the various national governments dithered, the Yunnan provincial government, under the leadership of Governor Long Yun, seized the initiative to formulate and implement a frontier policy to claim the Wa States and in particular the valuable Lufang silver mines, which lay within the disputed "No Man's Land" and belonged to five local leaders. This frontier policy incorporated an extensive and more comprehensive study of Yunnan's frontier regions in historical, political, geographic, and ethnographic terms and efforts to extend provincial administration to the frontier with the goal of acquiring mineral resources. The coherence of this policy and adoption of methods previously used by the British to assert claims in the Pianma dispute highlighted the growing sophistication of the provincial government regarding border matters. Furthermore, the Yunnan provincial government was working independently of any frontier policy set at the national level.

Miao Yuntai, the head of the Yunnan Bureau of Industry and Agriculture in Long's government, was the first to become interested in the potential of the Lufang silver mines. Before taking concrete steps to secure the mines, he required more information about the mines' value and the Wa leaders who controlled the region and shared ownership of the silver mines. To acquire firsthand information, Miao ordered the nearest magistrates: to proceed to the mining area to meet with the Wa chiefs, to investigate the condition of the mines, and to secure ore samples. Likely out of fear of Wa hostility, the two magistrates ignored Miao's orders and remained in well-traveled areas only, never met with the Wa chiefs, and never ventured into the mining region. They did however bring back three mule loads of ore.³¹

Miao Yuntai found the report unsatisfactory, yet he remained committed to investigating this potential source of much needed revenue. Because the magistrates had neither investigated the mines nor met with the local leaders, Miao still lacked critical firsthand information. Therefore, he commissioned two separate expeditions to the Wa territories in 1929. One mission was led by Li Jingsen, an official of the provincial bank. Li's mission focused on extending provincial authority and negotiating for access to the mines. William Draper, an American mining engineer employed by the provincial government at the Gejiu tin mines, conducted the second mission. Miao charged Draper with surveying the Lufang mines and ascertaining the potential value of the slag heaps and remaining deposits. Taken together, these two missions were designed to provide firsthand, expert advice about the practicality of working the mines and secure the crucial support of the local leadership to exploit to the mines.

After returning from Lufang, Draper reported that the slag heaps near the mines were extensive. His assays confirmed that the ore was rich, and even approached a British frontier official about applying for a mineral concession. While his report provided critical data on the state of the mines and assay of the slag, Draper's recommendation was that the mines were unworkable due to transportation considerations.

Li Jingsen's mission was to meet with the local leaders, assure them of the provincial government's goodwill and investigate acquiring rights to the mineral resources. Li traveled to the frontier and met with local leaders on two separate occasions, the first time in 1929, and then again in January 1933. In the latter mission, Li acquired the Banhong Was' consent to reopen the mine. The Banhong Wa leader was one of the five princes who claimed shared ownership of the mines. Li's repeated trips reflected persistence on the part of the provincial government to secure the mines and supply desperately needed silver for the provincial economy, even though the location of the mines hindered exploitation.

Miao's efforts to acquire firsthand information regarding the Wa mines had paid off handsomely. He now had reports on the economic potential of the area and the political situation. The next step in Miao's strategy to extend Yunnan's provincial administration into the region to assure access was summed up by the British consul-general in Kunming:

The Commissioner of Agriculture is said to be asking the Yunnan Government to invite the headmen of Banhong... and environs to visit Yunanfu [sic] and be invested with official rank or confirmation of any rank that may in the past have been conferred on them. The Commissioner wishes to establish friendly relations with a view to exploit their mines as part of his general mining policy. . . .³²

The Yunnan provincial government was now taking an active interest in administering these border regions with a view to exploiting the mines. Though economically weak, the provincial government was focusing some of its limited resources in this area to secure the potentially lucrative silver mines.³³

The culmination of Yunnan's interest in the border area and expression of frontier policy was found in *Research on Yunnan's Frontier Problems* (*Yunnan Biandi Wenti Yanjiu*). This two-volume work, published in 1933, provided the clearest official statement of the Yunnan provincial government's

frontier policy. Published under the seal of Governor Long Yun, it included articles related to all of Yunnan's frontier problems. The "Yellow Book," as it came to be called in foreign circles, included ethnographic studies, geographical and political treatises, and accounts of visits to both the Yunnan-Burma and Yunnan-French Indochina frontiers. Within this work, Yunnan province, on behalf of the nation, laid claim to territories including over one-third of Burma as "a feudatory state belonging to us (the Chinese)."³⁴ The Yellow Book comprised a sophisticated, well-researched study of the frontier and represented the official position of Long Yun's government.

Even though Long's government made these claims for all of China, British writers noted that the Nationalist government in Nanjing did not likely share the claims evidenced in the "Yellow Book." "Whatever may be the official view of Nankin [Nanjing], the Yellow Book is a clear indication of the official view of the Chinese Provincial authorities in Yunnan, and as such should serve as a warning of the difficulties which must beset the path of sweet reason and negotiations."³⁵ From the *Statesman*, published in Calcutta, came the observation that, "[T]he Yunnan Government dreams much more boldly than Nanking [Nanjing]."³⁶ These writers accurately assessed a divergence in frontier policy between the Nationalist Government in Nanjing and the Yunnan provincial government of Long Yun in Kunming. Through the Yellow Book, Long claimed the disputed territories for China, but in reality, he sought them in order to stabilize the Yunnan economy and further provincial autonomy.

British Response and the Wa Column

Long's government was not the only one concerned with settling the boundary. In British Burma, frontier officials argued for an expedition to the Wa States to extend British administration and end the boundary controversy in a manner reminiscent of the Pianma matter in the north. British officials outlined three basic reasons for sending an expedition into the Wa States after all these years.

The first issue was controlling headhunting.³⁷ Due to the nature of the terrain and attitude of the Was, any attempt to administer and control this region would require a significant British political and economic commitment, which had previously been lacking. It must be noted that even British officials in Burma considered headhunting a minor concern as it was virtually confined amongst the Was themselves.³⁸

The second issue was opium suppression. The region produced large quantities of opium and acted as a transportation center. The Was and Yunnanese Muslims then exported the surplus opium to Thailand and French Indochina. Therefore, the Burma government could not fulfill its “international obligations either in respect of suppressing opium cultivation in administered territory or of preventing wholesale smuggling to other countries.”³⁹ Although these issues provided convenient and morally responsible excuses for occupying the area, they had been occurring for over thirty years with little concern or drive on the part of the British officials to force a settlement. Thus, the real motivation lies elsewhere.

The third reason for the British occupation at this juncture was economic. The Banhong region had long been reputed to possess valuable silver mines. However, the Burma government lacked an exact location and verification of the value of the mines until the Yunnan government sponsored Draper mission of 1929. Even with this evidence, the British governments in Burma, India, and London could not come to a decision regarding the frontier. They all desired a stable border and the Burma government, in particular, desired the potential revenue from the silver mines, but could not come to a decision about how to act to secure both objectives.

The growing realization of Yunnan’s frontier policy, with efforts at increased administrative control, economic penetration, and sweeping frontier claims, alarmed British officials in Burma, India, and London. Concerned that continued delay would see the Yunnanese acting to secure the southern frontier, as the British had the north, the Burma government dispatched the Wa Column, the long-debated and long-delayed expedition to the Wa States mining region, in February 1934.

Local Was contested the British expedition’s occupation of the Lufang mines and immediate vicinity.⁴⁰ However, the British Wa Column easily overcame Wa resistance and succeeded in gaining control of the mining area and initiated a proper survey and analysis of the mines and slag heaps. As expected, the British expedition touched off a storm of protest and a violent anti-British response throughout Yunnan, but most heavily in Western Yunnan where the threat of British imperialism was most keenly felt.

In bordering counties, the Southwest Volunteer Force (*Xinan Minzhong Yiyongjun*) organized to resist the British occupation. Drawing an estimated 1000 volunteers (*yiyong*) from Shuangjiang, Lancang, Gengma and Cangyuan counties, Li Zhanxian, a former bandit and recently rehabili-

tated militia leader, led his volunteer army to defend the frontier.⁴¹ While Li's irregular force threatened the British position in Lufang, Burma intelligence reports also identified two battalions of uniformed Yunnanese provincial troops within the disputed zone.⁴²

Local leaders who looked to Yunnan for support or evidenced anti-British intentions received military supplies from Long's government. In October 1934, Yunnan sent 20 rifles, 3 mule loads of ammunition, along with cloth and flags to one anti-British leader. The Gengma *tusi* returned from Dali with 200 rifles, while the Mengding *tusi* received 50 rifles in November. Even as late as July 1935, Long's government provided arms to friendly frontier leaders.⁴³

For Long Yun, the British occupation of the Banhong mines constituted a threat to Yunnan's economic reforms and territorial interests. The occupation presented a clear refutation of Yunnan's claims to the region, but by far the more pressing concern was the loss of potential revenue if the British retained control of the mines. To protect their interests and hold onto the mines, the provincial government adopted a dual response. Outwardly, Long denied responsibility for the altercation, called for negotiations, and assigned blame to the British. Tacitly, he condoned and supported anti-British resistance. Long's response reflected a shrewd attempt to preserve his claims through any means necessary but not to jeopardize his position or escalate the dispute through an outright clash with the British.

Long's handling of the southern undelimited frontier also reflects lessons learned from the earlier Pianma dispute. Long took pains to collect information about this contested region and under his seal published these studies, which supported Yunnan's claims to the disputed area. In the late 1920s, Long's government sought to investigate the economic potential of the mines and extend provincial administration thereby establishing his claim. His proactive frontier policy posed a viable challenge to British interests, which had permitted the issue to remain unresolved. When confronted with the British occupation of the Lufang mines, he did not back away from a confrontation as his predecessors had at Pianma. Though he was not willing to openly commit provincial forces, his actions clearly demonstrated his support for local Wa resistance and the efforts of irregular forces and volunteers. This persistent and violent resistance to the British occupation led to international arbitration.

The Nanjing Government and Frontier Policy

The Nanjing government desired negotiations to settle this latest frontier flare-up precipitated by the Wa Column's occupation of the Lufang mines. It wished to maintain good relations with the United Kingdom as it hoped that the British could help China in negotiations with Japan and provide a potential ally against Japan in the future. In order to maintain a positive relationship with Great Britain, the Nationalist government took no actions to antagonize the British, to incite anti-British public opinion, or to endorse anti-British boycotts.

The low priority given to border matters by the Nanjing government was demonstrated in the wake of the British expedition to occupy the Lufang mines. As early as 1928, shortly after coming to national prominence, the Nanjing government stated in a telegram to Governor Long Yun its intention to gather and organize all records regarding the southwestern frontier and initiate a consultation with the British Minister.⁴⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did approach the British Legation in 1929 "with proposals about negotiations for a settlement of the boundary disputes" but a senior British official dismissed them as "made irresponsibly without any knowledge of what they were talking about. . . ."⁴⁵

In the wake of the Wa Column's occupation of the Lufang mines, the Nanjing government dispatched its own expedition to the border. The central government's expedition to investigate the frontier was utterly unprepared: the two officials in charge had no frontier experience, and the mission possessed no modern maps of the disputed section. While maps are the first order of importance for frontier demarcation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had only at the last minute organized a geological party to survey the region.⁴⁶ When the mission arrived in Western Yunnan, they were told by the British not to enter the disputed area. This government mission then returned to Nanjing having achieved nothing. In the six years since the first statement by the central government to take charge of the disputed southwestern frontier, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had yet to take the first fundamental steps to preparing the necessary materials to negotiate a boundary settlement.

The International Boundary Settlement

In the wake of the British occupation and sporadic low-intensity border clashes during 1934, the British and Nationalist governments reached a preliminary agreement on the formation of a new Sino-Burma Joint Boundary

Commission. Both governments would send two commissioners and the President of the League of Nations would appoint a neutral commissioner, who would act as the President of the Commission. However, they disagreed on the power of this neutral commissioner. The British government wanted the neutral commissioner to be able to cast a vote as to the final disposition of the boundary, and his authority to interpret the boundary should be restricted to the provisions of the Burma Convention of 1894. The Chinese government opposed the proposal that the neutral commissioner should have a vote and proposed that the commission should be able to consider historical and political claims while delimiting the boundary.⁴⁷

By December 1934, these two fundamental differences, with broad implications for the manner in which the boundary would be delimited, were settled. On both points, the Nanjing government acceded to the British viewpoint.⁴⁸ The neutral commissioner would have the power to cast a vote, an important consideration to avoid a continued stalemate on the boundary settlement, and his authority to interpret the boundary would be restricted to geographical criteria.⁴⁹ Thus, the Chinese government weakened its negotiating position regarding the boundary settlement and territorial concessions for the sake of British support against Japan and restoring goodwill, which had been strained over the sporadic border violence.

The Nanjing government had little to gain in the border settlement. With a favorable outcome for the British, the Yunnan-Burma border would finally be settled and Sino-British relations stabilized. On the other hand, if the mining region was found to be in Chinese territory, the Yunnan provincial government could then exploit it. The potential mining revenue would serve to strengthen Long Yun's economic position and improve his ability to maintain autonomy from the central government. For the Nanjing government, the settlement of the issue was preferable to the unstable situation, but it would not directly benefit from a positive result and indeed would suffer a setback in its attempt to secure Yunnan's obedience to central authority.

In order for the Joint Boundary Commission to physically survey the frontier and come to a binding resolution, the approval and agreement of Long Yun was fundamental. Yet, the Nanjing Government lacked the ability to compel Long Yun to agree. Nanjing would have to win Long's support of the boundary delimitation.

After some delay, the Chinese representatives to the Sino-Burma Boundary Commission were named in early April 1935.⁵⁰ Representing

China were Senior Commissioner Liang Yukao, a Cantonese, and Junior Commissioner Yin Mingde, a Yunnanese. The former official, Mr. Liang, was a natural choice. He had been educated in England at the London School of Economics and held appointments as advisor to the Treaty Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Councilor to the Ministry of Railways. He spoke English fluently and worked well with his British counterparts.⁵¹ Liang was related to Wang Jingwei, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Liang represented the Nationalist Government's opinion and could be expected to take a conciliatory attitude towards the British and frontier concessions.

Yin Mingde, on the other hand, stood in stark contrast. He was a Yunnanese provincial, had distinguished himself in Western Yunnan as an anti-British leader, and had been previously associated with the Yunnan provincial government through the text, *Research on Yunnan's Frontier Problems*. Yin had contributed the chapter on the history of the Yunnan-Burma boundary dispute that included vast claims to Burmese territory. His background and writings revealed that he was quite knowledgeable about Yunnan's frontier history and was concerned with protecting Yunnan's provincial interests, which ran counter to those of the central government's priorities.

Yin Mingde's selection as the Junior Boundary Commissioner reflected the necessity of winning Long Yun's support of the commission and including provincial interests in the boundary settlement. An agreement would not have been possible without Long's cooperation nor could the joint survey have been carried out without his support. From a diplomatic standpoint, Yin was a poor candidate for commissioner. He lacked the official standing of his peers and his well-established anti-British sentiment and unwillingness to consider any concessions with regard to Chinese territory ensured that his presence would preclude amicable mutual concessions. However, from the Yunnanese perspective, these were very desirable qualities. With Yin playing a central role on the Joint Boundary Commission, Yunnan's provincial government was assured of a strident voice in support of its frontier policy.

During the first surveying season 1935-36, serious problems developed between Mr. Yin and the other border commissioners. At the end of the first season, he resigned from the Commission and was replaced for the second season by Mr. Zhang Cuyin. Mr. Zhang was also Yunnanese, and had been the mayor of Kunming and an official at Tengyue.⁵² The continuing influence of Long Yun, ensuring a prominent role to Yunnanese interests on the Commission, can be seen in Zhang's appointment. It reaffirmed an active role and provincial voice in the settlement.

While Long took steps to ensure that his interests were represented in the person of a boundary commissioner, the form of the commission restricted his claims. The preliminary agreements negotiated between the British and the Waijiaobu affirmed the geographic criteria of the boundary line, thereby excluding the political criteria argued for and incorporated in the convention text. Furthermore, the voting power of the neutral Chairman ensured that there would be no deadlock. Even if the Yunnan viewpoint carried among the Chinese commissioners, it was bound to be opposed by the British and the neutral commissioner would have the final say. Long Yun had the venue for presenting his frontier policy, but the decisions made between the Nationalist Government and British officials in Nanjing before the commission ever met, muted this voice.

The Joint Boundary Commission completed its final survey season in April 1937. The neutral commissioner denied the most extreme Chinese territorial claims, Lufang and Kongmingshan. However, Colonel Iselin, in a highly controversial decision, noting the political criteria included in the original text, offered two boundary lines: a physical line and a political line. The physical line that he considered the official treaty line, followed the Scott line for the most part. The political line, on the other hand, extended to the west of the physical line and included Banhong and a considerable portion of the Wa States in Chinese territory. This political line recognized China's historical claims to these small states and validated some of Yunnan's lesser boundary claims. Neither party was satisfied, but before any subsequent negotiations could be made, the Japanese invaded north China bringing an end to the boundary issue.

Conclusion

Between 1911 and 1937, the Yunnan-Burma border comprised a warlord frontier. The Yunnan provincial militarists, Cai E and Long Yun, were at the forefront of the frontier dispute. Their handling of this critical foreign relations issue demonstrated their differing views on the role of the central government versus that of the provincial government and the emerging influence of provincial militarists on foreign policy issues. Long's provincial administration crafted the only coherent frontier policy regarding the border. The Chinese Nationalist government simply lacked the political power to influence this remote province and was preoccupied with other more pressing matters. As a result, Long sought to define the frontier in a manner designed

to enhance provincial autonomy and his control over the province. The nature of this frontier dispute and the role of provincial militarists in foreign relations and frontier policy is also a frontier of warlordism. Warlords have consistently been seen to either be the lackeys of foreign imperialists or not involved in foreign relations. The history of the Yunnan-Burma border dispute challenges both conceptions. Some militarists did indeed have extensive contact with foreign powers. Those militarists who ruled frontier regions, like Yunnan, had to maintain contact with foreign powers in order to manage a number of issues important to the preservation of the individual militarist's base of operations. And when it suited their purposes, provincial militarists actively opposed western encroachment. To do otherwise, would have conceded potential resources that were vital to maintaining provincial autonomy and thereby the militarist's political survival.

NOTES

1. For differences between European and Chinese views of the cartography and incorporating frontier regions, see Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 51-80, 114-121.

2. Mao Zedong is one of the most often cited critics of Chinese warlords and warlordism, see Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1965), 1:65. Other scholars of warlordism have accepted this appraisal to varying degrees, James Sheridan, *China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912-1949* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 103, and Edward McCord, *The Power of the Gun: The Emergence of Modern Chinese Warlordism* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1997), 8.

3. Sao Saimong Mangrai, *The Shan States and the British Annexation*, Southeast Asia Program Department of Asian Studies series no. 57 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1965), 275.

4. Alastair Lamb, *Asian Frontiers: Studies in a Continuing Problem* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968), 147.

5. Lamb, *Asian Frontiers*, 150.

6. Zhang Fengqi, *Yunnan Wajijiao Wenti* [Yunnan's Foreign Affairs Problems] (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1937), 69-75.

7. For a detailed study of the contrast between the Western "hard" boundary versus prevailing "soft" frontiers in Southeast Asia, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1994), 62-80.

8. This overview of the *tusi* system was drawn from John Herman, "Empire in the Southwest: Early Qing Reforms to the Native Chieftain System," *Journal of Asian Studies* 56 (1997): 50-55.

9. For settlement patterns in Yunnan, see James Lee, "The Legacy of Immigration to Southwest China, 1250-1850," *Annales de Demographie Historique* (1982): 279-304.

10. Hpimaw is the Lashi name for the cluster of villages between the Ngawchang River

and the N'Maikha-Salween watershed. This same village cluster is known as Pianma to the Chinese. Furthermore, Pianma was used to refer both to the general region and cluster of villages as well as the proper name of two villages, Upper and Lower Pianma, Shang Pianma and Xia Pianma in Chinese, respectively.

11. Chang Ch'eng-sun, *Zhong Ying Dian Mian Jiangjie Wenti* [Sino-Burmese Frontier Problems] Yenching Journal of Chinese Studies, Monograph series no. 15 (Peiping: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1937), 199.

12. United Kingdom, Public Record Office, FO 228/4299, Confidential Print, Burma-China Frontier: N'Maikha Section, Part II, The Hpimaw Expedition, 1912, 4. 9.

13. PRO FO 228/4299, Proposed Expedition, detailed recommendations of Burma Government, Confidential Print, Part II, 5.9.

14. PRO FO 228/4299, Mr. Hertz's Report, 24 February 1911, quoted in Confidential Print, Part II, 19.37.

15. PRO FO 228/1809, letter from Cai E, Governor of Yunnan, to O'Brien Butler, British Consul-General, Kunming, November 1911.

16. Donald Sutton, *Provincial Militarism and the Chinese Republic: The Yunnan Army, 1905-25* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 147.

17. Republic of China, Nankang, Taiwan, Diplomatic Files, Pianma 03-27, 3-(1), letter from Cai E to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 January 1913.

18. Sutton, *Provincial Militarism*, 147, and Yi Guogan, *Li Fuzongtong Zhengshu* (Official writings of Vice-President Li) (Original 1915, Reprint Taipei, 1962), 128.

19. ROC, Pianma Files 03-27, 3-(1), from Cai E to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 January 1913.

20. ROC, Pianma Files 03-27, 3-(1), from Cai E to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 January 1913.

21. For Jordan's position, see Wendy Palace, "Sir John Jordan and the Burma Border, 1906-1912," *Asian Affairs* 30 (1999): 322-323.

22. This spelling, Kung-ming-shan, is drawn directly from the treaty. Various sources use several different spellings due to the disparities in Chinese romanization. These include, Kongmingshan, Kungmingshan, K'ungmingshan and Gongmingshan, which represent the pinyin romanization of the two mountain ranges in dispute.

23. This reliance on local knowledge also led to the identification of a *third, locally known* "Kongmingshan" during the 1936-37 Joint Boundary Commission survey. During one march, the local guides identified another hill, known to the British as Aka Hill, as "Kong-ming-shan." Chairman Iselin noted that "we now have three Kongmingshans," referring to Loimu, Point B, which the British maintained as the treaty's Kongmingshan, and now Aka Hill, see FO 676/269, Diary of F.S. Grose, Senior Commissioner, Sino-British Boundary Commission for the period 13 to 19 January, 1937.

24. Of course, this "No Man's Land" was populated by Wa, Shan [ethnic Thai], and smaller numbers of additional ethnic minorities. This term was used by British officials and even appeared on some maps to depict the region **between** the two extreme boundary claims, the

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Scott line and the Liuchen line.

25. For the British terminology, see Sir J. George Scott, *Burma and Beyond* (London: Grayson and Grayson, 1932), 291.

26. For the Chinese usage, see Fang Guoyu, *Dianxi Bianqu Kaochaji* [An Investigation of the Western Yunnan Border Region] (Kunming: Guoli Yunnan Daxue Xinan Wenhua Yanjiushi, 1943), 4.

27. United States, Department of State, Division of Far Eastern Affairs [US DFEA] 745.9315/2, "Burma-Yunnan (Wa States) Frontier Dispute Proposed Reference to League of Nations," report by Vice Consul Reginald Kazanjian, Rangoon, to Secretary of State, 17 July 1933, 4.

28. British Library, India Office Records [IOR] Mss Eur 252/28, "Brief Geographical and Ethnographical descriptions of the Wa States," prepared by the General Staff, Burma District, September 1935, included in John Clague Papers.

29. W. Stark Toller, "The Burma-Yunnan Boundary Commission, 1935-37," *Eastern World* 3 (1949): 4.

30. US DFEA 745.9315/2, from Kazanjian to Secretary of State, 17 July 1933, 5.

31. PRO FO 228/4299, I.G. Lloyd, Chief Secretary, Burma Government to Sir Denys Bray, Foreign Secretary, India Government, 22 November 1929, and G.E. Harvey, *Wa Precis*, 107-108.

32. Statement by Kirke, British Consul-General, quoted in US DFEA 745.9315/2, from Kazanjian to Secretary of State, 17 July 1933, 65.

33. Zhou Guangzhuo, *Dian-Mian Nanduan Weidingjie Diaocha Baogao* [Report on the Investigation of the Southern Undelimited Section of the Yunnan-Burma Boundary] (Taipei, Taiwan: Chengwen Chubanshe, 1967 reprint of 1935 edition), 56.

34. "Burma Frontier Trouble; Chinese Claim to One-Third of Province," *New Burma*, 26 December 1934, newspaper article included in US DFEA 745.9315/18, from Kazanjian to Secretary of State, 29 December 1934. For some of the claims that prompted this report, see Yin Mingde, "Zhong-Ying Dian-Mian Jiewu Jiaoshe Shi [A History of the Sino-British Yunnan Burma Boundary Negotiations]," in *Yunnan Biandi Wenti Yanjiu* [Research on Yunnan's Frontier Problems] (Kunming: Yunnan Shengli Kunhua Minzhong Jiaoyuguan Chuban. 1933), v. 2, 461-467.

35. PRO FO 676/208, extract from article, "Longing Eyes on Burma Frontier," *Times of India*, Bombay, India, 20 December 1934.

36. PRO FO 676/208, extract from article, "Chinese Claim to one third of Province," *Statesman*, Calcutta, India, 21 December 1934.

37. US DFEA 745.9315/2, from Kazanjian to Secretary of State, 17 July 1933, 10.

38. IOR Mss Eur 252/28, "British Treaty Position," Clague Papers.

39. US DFEA 745.9315/2, from Kazanjian to Secretary of State, 17 July 1933, 11.

40. US DFEA 745.9315/6, from Kazanjian, to Secretary of State, 12 March 1934, 2-3.

41. Zhou, *Dian-Mian Nanduan*, 64-65.

42. PRO FO 676/129, from H.I. Harding, British Consul-General, Kunming, to Sir Arthur Cadogan, British Minister in Peking [Beijing], 11 June 1934.
43. IOR Mss Eur 252/28, "Taunggyi Files," Clague papers.
44. PRO FO 228/3894, translation of note from Zhang Weihai, Yunnan Commissioner of Foreign Affairs, to Kirke, British Consul-General, 26 November 1928.
45. PRO FO 676/69, comments by Eric Teichman, Peking Legation, 23 July 1931.
46. PRO FO 676/209, from Harding to Cadogan, 5 July 1935, and translated excerpt of Zhang Fengqi's article, "A Journey to the Frontier in the Szemao and Puerh regions," Yunnan Ribao [Yunnan Daily], 22 June 1935.
47. FO 405/273, Sir John Simon, British Foreign Secretary, to Cadogan, British Minister in Peking [Beijing], 24 November 1934.
48. FO 405/273, Cadogan to Simon, 17 December 1934.
49. In fact, the neutral Commissioner, Colonel Iselin understood his role and authority more broadly. During the first survey season, he intimated his interest to include both geographical and political/historical criteria in settling the boundary. He believed that viewpoint was embodied in the original text and should be continued. For results of Iselin's interpretation, see IOR M-5-175, "Summary of the Joint Boundary Commission Report," minute paper by H.A.F. Rumbold, 31 July 1937.
50. US DFEA 745.9315/25, from Arthur Ringwalt, US Consul, Kunming to Secretary of State, 2 April 1935.
51. US DFEA 745.9315/36, from Ringwalt to Secretary of State, 13 November 1935 and *Who's Who in China: Biographies of Chinese Leaders. Fifth Edition* (Shanghai: China Weekly Review, 1936), 293.
52. US DFEA 745.9315/47, from Ringwalt to Secretary of State, 5 October 1936.

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