

The Ambans of Tibet—Imperial Rule at the Inner Asian Periphery

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In the eighteenth century, China experienced an exceptional flourishing of dynastic government. The Qing emperor ruled successfully over an empire consisting of China proper and the Inner Asian regions of Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet. The Qing state was a fairly typical example of an early-modern land-based Eurasian empire.¹ Its state apparatus was relatively small compared to the size of Qing society and economy. In China proper, the low level of governmental presence was compensated by many quasi-governmental tasks entrusted or left to the indigenous elites of gentry, local headmen, militia leaders or commercial brokers and different social groups like lineages or villages. The emperor used campaign-like initiatives in local governments to mobilise men and resources across the divide of formal and informal institutions of rule.² In the newly conquered regions of the Inner Asian periphery such a process of power-balancing between central and local (bureaucratic and sub-bureaucratic) government was more difficult to achieve. The Qing government developed new administrative structures for political control. To consolidate central rule over the multi-ethnic frontier entities new bureaucracies and new formal and informal relationships had to be created. Imperial administrators interacted between the dynastic centre and a multitude of local identities in the peripheries. Like viceroys, proconsuls or governors in other empires of the early modern world, such imperial manpower was indispensable at crucial points in the spatial networks of the polity. In Tibet, representatives of the Qing court, the imperial *ambans* (*zhu Zang dachen*), fulfilled the important task to embody the imperial centre at the periphery.

1 Peter C. Perdue, 'Empire and Nation in Comparative Perspective: Frontier Administration in Eighteenth-Century China', in Huri Islamoglu and Peter C. Perdue, ed., *Shared Histories of Modernity: China, India and the Ottoman Empire* (London, New York, and New Delhi, 2009), 21–45, here 21.

2 R. Bing Wong, 'Formal and Informal Mechanisms of Rule and Economic Development: The Qing Empire in Comparative Perspective', in Huri Islamoglu and Peter C. Perdue, ed., *Shared Histories of Modernity: China, India and the Ottoman Empire* (London, New York, and New Delhi, 2009), 231–54, here 246–251.

The Tibetans had originally gained the attention of the Qing government because of their close contacts with the Mongolian peoples.³ Dynastic historiography interpreted the imperial award of an honorific title to the Dalai Lama during his visit at the Qing court in 1652 as the foundational event of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet.⁴ During the eighteenth century, when the consolidation of imperial power in Inner Asia proceeded apace, Tibet evolved into a protective buffer on the south-western border of the Qing state. Like Mongolia in the north and Xinjiang in the north-west, Tibet was turned into an important frontier region of the expanding Sino-Manchurian empire.

Officially, the Qing government justified its multiple interventions into Tibetan affairs during the eighteenth century by citing the crises frequently occurring in the region.⁵ The institutional form of the imperial government over Tibet grew out of the specific historical context of repeated needs for military intervention when the region was thrown into turmoil by Mongolian raiders or as a result of aristocratic power-struggles. The stationing of two grand minister residents in Tibet, the 'ambans' (meaning 'officials' in Manchu), can be best understood as a conscious response of the Qing emperor to those specific historical problems at an increasingly sensitive frontier of his empire.⁶

I

Like the governors of Chinese provinces the *ambans* acted as intermediaries bridging metropolis and periphery.⁷ In the wide field of Tibetan regional interests, they represented the emperor's eyes and ears. Through their political activities, indigenous elites were groomed to act as trusted imperial subjects. Like European proconsuls, imperial ambans functioned as an instrument of

3 In the early seventeenth century, Mongol tribes had extended their influence over Tibet. With their khan's military support, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82) destroyed the power of his religious rivals and founded a centralised Tibetan state in 1642. For the rest of the century, Mongol khans represented the de facto rulers of Tibet.

4 Sabine Dabringhaus, *Das Qing-Imperium als Vision und Wirklichkeit. Tibet in Laufbahn und Schriften des Song Yun (1752–1835)* (Stuttgart, 1994), 45–48.

5 Elliot Sperling, 'Awe and Submission: A Tibetan Aristocrat at the Court of Qianlong', *The International History Review* 20, no. 2 (June 1998), 325–335, here 325f.

6 Yingcong Dai, *The Sichuan Frontier and Tibet. Imperial Strategy in the Early Qing* (Seattle and London, 2009), 99–111.

7 Li Fengzhen, 'Shizhi Qingdai Xizang zhezheng guanzhi de yuanqi [Origins of the political administration of Qingtime Tibet]', *Xizang minzu xueyuan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 2 (2010), 15–18.

elite integration. As executive agents of the central government, the *ambans* were responsible for the preservation of order, the provision of disaster relief, the maintenance of frontier defence and all diplomatic negotiations in the region. Together with the military generals (*jiangjun*) in other frontier regions of the Qing empire, the *ambans* belonged to the emperor's multiethnic corps of imperial governors. Their office reflected the dual structure of the Qing for they served simultaneously as masters of the routine processes of local administration and as trouble-shooters for the imperial centre at the periphery. As emissaries of the central government and, at the same time, heads of the local administration, the *ambans* embodied an ambiguous identity. Their leading role in local government was the result of the imperial recognition that a remote frontier region like Tibet could not be permanently secured by military means but only in cooperation with the Tibetan elites, both the lamaist leadership of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama and the secular aristocracy.⁸

The first imperial *amban* was sent to Tibet in 1728, when a power-struggle among aristocratic factions within the Tibetan leadership had provoked the intervention of the Qing army. His main task was to monitor the local government and to back the one-man rule of the Tibetan aristocrat Polhanas (1689–1747).⁹ In 1751, the political position of the *ambans* was further strengthened when, after yet another political crisis in Lhasa, the Qing emperor decided to re-install the Dalai Lama as theocratic ruler above a council of four ministers of equal rank. As official advisers to the Dalai Lama's government, the *ambans* were more strongly involved in Tibetan affairs than before. Finally, after two invasions by the Nepalese Gurkhas, the Qianlong emperor instructed the *ambans* to interfere directly in the government of Tibet.¹⁰ The 'Twenty-Nine Article Ordinance of Government' of 1793 placed the Tibetan religious and political hierarchies under the supervision of the *amban* (who always came with a deputy, also called 'amban'). He received full authority over all administrative, political, economic, and financial affairs and a legal status equal to that of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama.¹¹

8 Wu Fengpei and Ceng Guoqing, eds., *Qingdai zhu Zang dachen zhuanlie* [Short biographies of the Qing ambans of Tibet] (Xuchang, 1988), 1–4; Chen Boping, 'Qingdai zhu Zang dachen de shezhi jiqi lishi zuoyong' [The establishment of the Qing amban of Tibet and his historical role], *Qinghai minzu yanjiu* 1 (2005), 79–82.

9 Chen Zhigang, 'Lun Qingdai qianqi Puolunai zongli Zangzheng de lishi yuanyin' [Historical reasons why Polhanas ruled Tibetan politics during the early Qing period], *Shehui kexue jikan* 6 (2005), 145–150.

10 Yingcong Dai, *Sichuan Frontier*, 135–138, 145f.

11 Cao Xinbao, "'Qinding Xizang zhangcheng" de lishi jiazhi yanjiu' [Research on the historical value of the Imperial Tibet-Statut], *Jinzhong xueyuan xuebao* 1 (2008), 87–90;

All Tibetan officials had to be appointed and replaced jointly by the theocratic leaders and the *amban*. The *amban*'s power of control over religious affairs included the supervision of the Tibetan monasteries and of the 'drawing of lots from the Golden Ballot-Box' for choosing higher reincarnations.¹² In the case of Tibetan defence policy, the *amban* commanded the imperial garrison forces, consisting of thirteen hundred Green Standard soldiers stationed at Lhasa. Every year he had to lead two patrol tours into the border areas.¹³ Being the sole authority in charge of Tibet's foreign relations, he was empowered to control the correspondence of the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. The *amban* was the only person in Tibet entitled to communicate directly with the Qing emperor by way of palace memorials.¹⁴ Only through him were the two theocratic rulers of Tibet able to address the central government in Beijing.¹⁵

The implementation of such a new and extensive competence of the *amban* could be accomplished only by an experienced and loyal official. The Qianlong emperor chose Song Yun for this difficult task.¹⁶

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- Niu Lühua, 'Luelun "Qinding Xizang zhangcheng" jiqi lishi yiyi' [Concerning the historical role of the Imperial Tibet-Statut], *Qinghai minzu yanjiu* 1 (2009), 86–90; Li Fengchen, 'Shizhe Qingdai Xizang shezheng guanzhi de yuanqi' [The origins of the Qing regency administration of Tibet], *Xizang minzu xueyuan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 2 (2010), 15–18.
- 12 Chen Qingying, 'Qingdai jinping cheqian zhidu de zhiding jiqi zai Xizang de shishi' [The creation and realization in Tibet of the system of drawing of lots from the Golden-Box], *Xizang minzu xueyuan bao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 3 (2006), 1–7; Sun Zhenping, 'Tan Qingdai "Jinben baping" zhiqian zhidu' [The system of the 'drawing lots out of the ballot-box' of the Qing period], *Zhengfa luntan* [Discussions on politics and law] 6 (1998), 108–117.
- 13 Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 187f.
- 14 There were two ways to communicate with the imperial centre: regular memorials sent to the Qing court by officials through the Office of Transmission, with copies sent to relevant agencies, thus immediately known throughout the court, and secret memorials, which were sent by high officials and imperial bond servants directly to the emperor being opened only by the ruler personally. See F. W. Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800* (Cambridge, Mass. 1999), 883f.
- 15 Guo Qing, 'Qingdai zhu Zang dachen guangui' [Administrative rules of the *amban* office in Tibet in the Qing period], *Zhongyang minzu xueyuan zangzu yanjiusuo* (1985), 171–184; Zhang Zhirong, 'Zangnei shanhou zhangcheng' ershijiu tiaode falue diwei [The legal status of the 29-articles-statut after the pacification of Tibet], *Xizang yanjiu* 1993.1, 107–115; Luo Bu, 'Xinzheng gaige yu dachen tizhi' [New politics of reform and the *amban* system], *Xizang daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 1 (2010), 74–83.
- 16 See Qianlong's commentary in: *Junjichu* [state council], *Lufu zouzhe (minzu lei)* [Reports of the court (peoples affairs)], 1148 (1792), *Zhongguo diyi lishi dang'anguan*, Beijing.

II

Song Yun (1752–1835) belonged to a group of special imperial appointees who were selected regardless of their rank or location in the empire as imperial trouble-shooters. Song Yun had just started his official career at the Qing court when he first caught the attention of Qianlong who transferred him to the grand secretariat (*neike*). During his long career, Song Yun came to be appointed to all conceivable senior offices of Qing frontier management—in the Northeast, in Mongolia, in Eastern Turkestan, and in Tibet.

Song Yun was born into a Mongolian banner family living north-west of Beijing. His ancestors belonged to a Mongolian tribe that was among the first to serve the Qing dynasty. Song Yun was educated in a banner school and trained as a translator. During his later career he also studied the Confucian classics. In 1776, he entered the Qing court as secretary in the Grand Council of State. Members of this important organ of the central government had frequent and direct access to the emperor. They were selected for their intelligence and their ability to handle ‘high-level discretionary tasks’.

Both characteristics applied to Song Yun. His further career showed him as an agent of the centralising impulse emanating from the Qing court and as a representative of the new military emphasis during the Qianlong reign.¹⁷ After 1783, Song Yun was entrusted with various offices of great responsibility such as Supervisor of Jilin province (1783) and High Commissioner of Kunlun in Mongolia (1785), where he solved a crisis in Chinese-Russian border trade.¹⁸ In 1793, he escorted the first British diplomatic mission to China under Lord Macartney on their return journey from Beijing to Hangzhou.¹⁹

The Qianlong emperor appreciated Song Yun for his outstanding qualities as a trustworthy and honest servant of the Qing state. Only in his forties, Song Yun had already reached high official rank and gained a lot of experience in imperial frontier politics. This was the reason why, in 1794, Qianlong decided to send him as *amban* to Tibet with the special task of reforming the Tibetan government according to the imperial ordinance of 1793. During his four years in office, Song Yun introduced a whole set of reforms concerning politics,

17 Mark C. Elliott, *Emperor Qianlong. Son of Heaven, Man of the World* (New York, 2009), 86–106.

18 Zhao Ersun, ed., *Qingshi gao* [Short history of the Qing] (Beijing, 1928), Vol. 37, Chapter 342, 1113f. See also Rosemary Quedsted, *Sino-Russian Relations: A Short History* (Sydney, London, and Boston, 1984), 59.

19 J.L. Cranmer-Byng, ed., *An Embassy to China. Being the Journal Kept by Lord Macartney during the Embassy to the Emperor Ch'ien-lung, 1793–1794* (London, 1962), 160.

traditional customs, the economy, and frontier defence. His first task, however, was to convince the Tibetans that they would benefit from a stronger involvement of Qing representatives in their own affairs.

Political and Administrative Reforms

Song Yun started his reform initiative by elaborating an historical argument. He interpreted the repeated military interventions of the eighteenth century as acts of imperial benevolence.²⁰ This propaganda line echoed the Qing emperor's self-image as protector of the Buddhist world. Imperial supremacy over Tibet had been expressed through feudal titles given to the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama and manifested by the presence of an imperial standing army. Song Yun portrayed the emperor as a merciful overlord of all Tibetans, knowing that only in cooperation with the Tibetan elite would the *amban* be able to build an effective government and carry out successful reforms. With the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama he managed to establish good relations which he regarded as an important prerequisite for any successful imperial policy in Tibet. While Song Yun used the charisma of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama to introduce his reform policies, his active role in the Tibetan government restricted the theocratic rulers, by and large, to their religious tasks in society. In a report to the emperor he explained: 'It is indeed their way that they know only how to spread the knowledge of reading the holy scriptures. Furthermore, from the beginning they had no understanding in which way to educate their subjects and to sustain them.'²¹

Supporting his reformist strategies, the *amban* used the critical post-war situation in Tibet to demonstrate the emperor's benevolence. Above all, he initiated an extensive programme of relief. Song Yun involved the Dalai Lama in this project prompting him to contribute funds from his private treasury. Throughout Tibet, the *amban* ordered the registration of the suffering population and the distribution of aid to the needy. His immediate success in performing the new, key role of the imperial *amban* was based on the fact that Song Yun did not stay immured in his residence in Lhasa, as his predecessors had done, but travelled around the country and communicated with many different groups in Tibetan society.²²

20 See his memorial of May, 19th, 1795, in: Song Yun, ed., *Weizang tongzhi* [Local gazetter of Central Tibet], (Lhasa, 1982), 463f.

21 Song Yun, *Xizang tulue* [Plans and Strategies for Tibet], 1798, Wu Fengpei, ed. (Lhasa, 1982), 1f.

22 Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 169–183.

According to the new constitutional framework authorised by the imperial ordinance, Song Yun strengthened institutionalisation at all levels of the administration. In order to discipline officials and to fight widespread corruption, he introduced a strict penal code. The Chinese system for ranking officials was transferred to Tibet. In contrast to China proper, Tibetan officials did not have to pass official examinations because they were not schooled in the Confucian classics. They were appointed directly by the Dalai Lama and the *amban* acting in cooperation. Though all 175 secular officials of the Tibetan government were deliberately excluded from the knowledge of Chinese Confucianism, they were ruled by imperial representatives who propagated Confucian values to educate and lead them. Most of the Tibetan officials worked at the district level. Song Yun obliged them to send regular reports and subjected them to frequent controls by his own staff.²³

However, two important contradictions weakened the reformed Tibetan government directed by an imperial *amban*: There was a *cultural* contradiction between the *amban* as a representative of the idea of a Confucian way of imperial rule and the Tibetan clerical and secular bureaucracy adhering to Lamaism. A *structural* contradiction existed between the principle of checks and balances, so successful in the governance of China proper, and the quasi-despotic position of the imperial *amban*, who himself stood outside any control or censorship, at least in a Tibetan context.

Interference with Tibetan Customs

After the Gurkha Wars (1788, 1791/92), the role of the *amban* was strengthened in order to bring peace and order to Tibet and to consolidate the region as a protective shield of the Qing empire. At the same time, the imperial representatives propagated a civilising mission for non-Han-Chinese peoples at the empire's periphery. In the eyes of an *amban*, the Tibetans belonged to the frontier peoples of the Qing empire, who were invariably categorised as 'barbarians'. Therefore, they had not only to be introduced to structures of imperial governance. They also were in need of being educated and civilised.

Two local customs in particular enraged the imperial *ambans*: the celestial burial rites and the exposing of people afflicted by smallpox. Already Song Yun's predecessor He Lin (1753–96) had strictly prohibited both customs. Cemeteries were built to prevent any further celestial burials. In order to rescue smallpox patients from starvation in the wilderness, special villages in remote areas of the country were founded and supplied with food. In the eyes of the Qing officials, these customs were evidence of the barbarian mindset of the Tibetans.

²³ Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 167f.

They were interpreted as bad behaviour and signs of weakness. Under such circumstances, no understanding and trust between the Qing representatives and Tibetans of all classes was likely to develop.

Cultural interference was also practiced vis-à-vis the Tibetan aristocracy. The Qing government banned any further discovery of reincarnations within aristocratic families. Economic privileges such as tax relief were abolished as well as the automatic rise of men of noble birth to high positions in the local government. Nevertheless, the *ambans* still had to rely on aristocrats as their main source of local officialdom. Song Yun admonished his successors to respect the secular nobility as a powerful factor in Tibetan society but also to keep them more strictly in check than had been done in the past.

Similar policies of restraint were practiced towards the Tibetan clergy, the second pillar of the Tibetan elite. Monks were even harder to place under imperial control. The invention of the ballot box for higher reincarnations was only one attempt to tighten the imperial grip.²⁴ Two additional instruments were the introduction of a ranking system for ecclesiastical officials and the imperial supervision of the private treasuries of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama. However, Qing strategy towards Tibetan Lamaism was highly contradictory: On the one hand, Lamaism was generously supported. The Qing facilitated the expansion of monasteries, sponsored the translation and printing of religious texts, etc. On the other hand, the Qing government tried to subject religious institutions and personnel to strong imperial control.²⁵ Any form of Tibetan resistance would have been resolutely suppressed. However, no local opposition is mentioned in the sources, which are dominated by authors from the Qing government and its representatives in Tibet.

Economic Consolidation

After the Gurkha Wars, Tibet suffered badly from the effects of economic destruction by the invading army. Many Tibetans living in the frontier region had fled to Lhasa, where they formed a roaming and starving crowd of beggars. Their numbers were increased by runaway slaves and tenants, who were unable to pay rent and taxes to the three local types of landlord—monastic, noble, and governmental. The *amban* was shocked by the poverty in the Tibetan countryside. In detailed reports to the central government, Song Yun

24 In 1792, the Qing government introduced the system of choosing high lamaist reincarnations by ballot boxes to control the transfer of theocratic leadership in Tibetan society. Names of possible candidates were written on a piece of paper and thrown into a box. The selection of one slip occurred in the public to prevent manipulations.

25 Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 154–162.

mentioned examples collected during his frequent personal investigations throughout the country:

There were more than fifty families in Ciung-tui at the beginning. Now, only eight families still live there, but taxes are continued to be demanded yearly according to the number of the original families. Originally more than a thousand families lived in one of the tributary districts of Sera; today, although only three hundred families are left, taxes and levies are collected according to the old number of families. Because this happens in all districts, the people are left in a state they cannot endure.²⁶

In order to solve both problems—the suffering of the war victims and the tax burden of the ordinary people—Song Yun introduced an economic reform programme consisting of four main measures:

- (1) The *amban* ought to control the entire tax income of the Tibetan government as well as the governmental right to distribute all tax obligations.
- (2) The tax system had to be readjusted and tax arrears cancelled.
- (3) The unpaid transportation *corvée*, the so-called ‘u-lag’, was reduced and partly transformed into paid services.
- (4) The rent system was placed under the control of the local government in order to prevent further exploitation and corruption by Tibetan landlords.²⁷

Song Yun wanted to appease Tibetan society by enforcing law, order, and stability. His economic reforms reduced aristocratic privileges and improved the living conditions of the ordinary people, from whom he tried to win loyalty towards the Qing government. This policy corresponded to the imperial strategy in China proper, where living conditions for farmers were improved in order to maintain peace and order at the local level.²⁸

Because of its extreme geographic position, Tibet depended on commercial exchange, which for a long time had been dominated by merchants from neighbouring regions in the Himalaya. The imperial *ambans* tried to redirect Tibet’s trade towards China. They introduced Tibet’s own money to replace the Nepalese currency that had been in use. Though Tibetan foreign trade with

²⁶ Song Yun, *Weizang tongzhi*, 458.

²⁷ Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 177–182.

²⁸ See Pierre-Étienne Will and R. Bin Wong, *Nourish the People. The State Civilian Granary System in China, 1650–1850* (Ann Arbor, 1991).

non-Chinese neighbours could not be totally prohibited, the Qing government placed it under restriction and severe control.²⁹

The Construction of a Tibetan Frontier Defence

Qing armies had interfered four times in Tibetan affairs during the eighteenth century: In 1718, a conflict between two Mongolian tribes, who both attempted to control Tibet, had triggered the first Qing intervention. In 1727 and in 1751, internal conflicts within the aristocratic government at Lhasa had led to two further imperial expeditions. Then, in the early 1790s, two Gurkha invasions into the Tibetan borderlands justified, in the eyes of the Qianlong emperor, yet another phase of military engagement.³⁰ The appearance of two envoys of the British-Indian government in 1774 and 1783 in Tibet indicated the growing influence of another imperial power in the Himalayan region. In the context of the confrontation of competing empires in Central Asia, Tibet's importance as a protective shield for the Qing provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan grew significantly. Therefore, the Qianlong emperor decided not only to reform the Tibetan political order but also to demarcate a clear borderline protected by an imperial defence system.³¹

Tibet's own army, created by Polhanas, consisted of an untrained peasant militia ignorant of military discipline. These Tibetan soldiers had proved totally incompetent during the Gurkha Wars and had suffered heavy losses. Song Yun set up a standing army of 3,000 Tibetan soldiers commanded by six military governors who were chosen by the Dalai Lama and the *amban*. They were supported by over 1,300 Chinese Green Standard troops stationed at important strategic points throughout Tibet. In his description of the main principles of Tibet's frontier defence Song Yun emphasised the priority of domestic policy:

- (1) All kinds of trouble had to be prevented from occurring. This required the improvement of living conditions in Tibet in order to strengthen

29 Chen Zhigang, 'Qingdai Xizang yu Nanya maoyi jiqi yingxiang' [Tibet of the Qing period and the influence of trade with South Asia], *Sichuan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue)* 2 (2012), 21–28.

30 Deng Ruiling, 'Qing Qianlong chao dierci Guoerke qin Zang zhanzheng (1791–1792) shishang de jige wenti' [Some questions in the history of the second invasion of the Gurkha in Tibet 1791–1792 during the Qianlong reign], *Zhongguo zangxue* 1 (2009), 20–30.

31 Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 183–186. See also the two articles of Feng Zhi, 'Qingchu zhu Zang dachen tongling Qingjun jiqi tixi' [The early Qing system of commandment over the Qing army by the Tibet-Amban], *Xizang yanjiu* 1 (2009), 27–34 and 'Qingdai zhi Zang junshi zhidu de lishi pingjia' [Historical analysis of the Qing military system to rule over Tibet], *Xizang daxue xuebao (hanwen ban)* 4 (2007), 41–49.

the local society in its ability and willingness to resist any foreign invasion. It also meant the restriction and control of any cross-border movements including pilgrimages and religious exchanges with other subjects of the Qing empire.

- (2) The main force of any defence system in the region had to come from the Tibetan people themselves. Therefore, their own troops had to be trained and educated regularly in order to strengthen their combat readiness.

Song Yun travelled throughout Tibet investigating its topography and examining all strategic points. He produced some highly valuable reports and a first detailed collection of maps. His publications belong to a burgeoning body of writings on principles and practices of imperial administration in the eighteenth century.³²

Based on his growing knowledge of Tibet, Song Yun ordered regular patrol tours along the Tibetan border. The *amban* personally supervised the military manoeuvres and organised the payment and the logistic needs of his troops. Song Yun's military reforms were characterised by structural creativity and a high concern for bureaucratic sanctions. They were closely connected with his reform projects in other areas of Tibetan society. In his eyes, economic recovery and growth represented key factors of any defence strategy because only a stable society would have the strength and willingness to defend itself against foreign invasion.³³ In fact, even during the nineteenth century, when the Qing government had to concentrate on China proper, foreign troops did not enter Tibet again or were—as in the case of the Nepalese invasion of 1855—swiftly expelled by the Tibetan forces.

III

Shortly after the Qianlong emperor's death in 1799, Song Yun was recalled to Beijing. The Qing government's immediate concern turned to uprisings in China proper. The new Jiaqing emperor wanted to deploy the successful and experienced trouble-shooter Song Yun in his campaigns against the White Lotus rebels (1796–1804) in Central China.³⁴

³² Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 119–132.

³³ Dabringhaus, *Qing-Imperium*, 194–204.

³⁴ William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 155–157.

Nineteenth Century Tibet: The Slow Retreat of the Empire

The two wars against the Gurkhas marked the end of a frontier activism that the Qing dynasty had been pursuing since the late seventeenth century. The inclusion of the Gurkha kingdom in the Qing tributary system did not stimulate further Qing interest in the Himalayan region. Qianlong's successors lost any interest in Tibet. Therefore, Song Yun's reform projects did not survive into the nineteenth century—as we learn from reports of eyewitnesses like the French traveller Abbé Huc (1813–1860).³⁵ He described Tibetan monks as parasites who exploited the poor. The lamaist elite had regained its dominant position in society. The role of the *amban* was reduced to the control of external relationships. Thus, the acting *amban* Qi Shan (died 1854) forced Huc in 1846 to leave Tibet.³⁶ Most of Song Yun's successors neglected the multiple administrative tasks attached to their office. The structural weakness of the concentration of power in the hands of an *amban* was obvious. Moreover, the *amban's* pivotal role was not supported by any durable administrative system. Qing policy had strengthened the political influence of the Tibetan clergy by providing monks with ranks and offices. During the nineteenth century, competing monastic powers increasingly filled the void left by weak and inefficient *ambans*. Although Qing rule over Tibet became progressively less effective in the nineteenth century, the Tibetan local elite of monks and aristocrats showed no interest in turning against the Qing because the dynasty had no real impact on their activities. Nevertheless, they remained loyal to the dynasty until the downfall of the Qing in 1911. One important reason for this loyalty was the successful imperial instrumentalisation and multiple promotion of the theocratic Tibetan leadership. The Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama supplied the cultural legitimation that the Qing emperor needed for securing the loyalty of the Tibetan periphery.

Qing Officials: Generalists and Trouble-Shooters of the Empire

During his five years in office as imperial *amban* of Tibet, Song Yun had introduced an unprecedented degree of administrative organisation in this far-away periphery of the Qing empire. The financial and economic aid provided by the Qing government had improved the reputation of the dynasty in the eyes of the Tibetans who remained loyal to the Manchu court until its downfall in 1911. It seems that Song Yun had successfully attained his goal of improving

35 Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La. Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1989), 63ff.

36 Evariste Régis Huc, *Travels in Tartary, Thibet and China during 1844-5-6*, Translated from French by W. Hazlitt, Vol. 2. (London, 1852), ch. 5.

the structures of local government. Backed by the social-institutional envelope of a strong dynastic centre, an efficient official was able to start a process of early-modern state-building even in a remote frontier region like Tibet. In contrast to Nayancheng, who failed in his mission to the White Lotus war and was never able afterwards to regain his former high position at court, Song Yun continued his career as an effective trouble-shooter at the periphery of the empire.

His biography demonstrates how intense the identification of a Mongol official with the Qing state could be. At the same time, his career as an imperial frontier manager proves that Qing China's centralising process during the eighteenth century was not just the product of a single autocratic will emanating from a long-lived ruler like Qianlong but also the result of initiatives taken by men of varying positions in the hierarchy and of different generations. Song Yun's career offers another example of how the Qing government used the circulation of officials around the empire to solve specific regional problems. This practice was combined with another pattern in the promotion to higher office: to move up in the Qing civil service, one had to move out from the centre to the periphery. The Ottoman strategy of having different governors for different purposes did not work in the Qing empire. Imperial agents like Song Yun had to be generalists who were confronted with a wide range of tasks of government in often different local environments.