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The Five Buddha Districts on the Yunnan-Burma Frontier: A Political System Attached to the State

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Abstract

The Five Buddha Districts system prevailed from the 1790s to the 1880s on the frontier between Yunnan, in Southwest China, and the Burmese Kingdom, in the mountainous areas to the west of the Mekong River. Through more than a century of political mobilization, the Lahu communities in this area became an integrated and militarized society, and their culture was reconstructed in the historical context of ethnic conflicts, competition, and cooperation among the Wa, Dai, and Han Chinese settlers. The political elites of the Five Buddha Districts, however, were monks who had escaped the strict orthodoxy of the Qing government to become local chieftains, or rebels, depending on political changes in southern Yunnan. As a centralized polity, the Five Buddha Districts system was attached to the frontier politics of the Qing state before the coming of European colonial powers. The Qing state provided a sociopolitical space for local groups to develop their political ideals between various powerful Dai-Shan chieftains. The negotiation, competition, and cooperation between the Five Buddha leadership and the Qing, Dai chieftains, and neighboring political powers had been thoroughly integrated into the frontier politics of this interdependent society for more than two hundred years. As the history of the Yunnan-Burma frontier formation shows that no mountain space existed to allow the natives to escape from the state through their shifting agriculture, and anarchism was not practiced by the mountain people who were separated from the state, the author argues that a stateless region like James Scott's "Zomia" did not historically exist in this region.

Keywords: Five Buddha Districts, Yunnan-Burma frontier, Lahu, ethnic creation, Zomia

Introduction

With the increase in Han immigration from interior provinces like Jiangxi, Hunan, Sichuan, and the various methods of controlling local resources such as tea, salt, and mines, the conditions for ethnic mobilization for native ethnic minorities in Yunnan's southern frontier had been established since the early Qing dynasty (Ma 2013b). Due in particular to political reform aimed at integrating local Dai chieftains into the administrative county system after the 1720s, more

and more Han immigrants assimilated into local native communities. Some of these immigrants became religious and political leaders in these mountain communities, following a secret society tradition faithful to the Big Vehicle Religion (*Da Cheng Jiao* 大乘教) (Ma 2011). Meanwhile, other Han people gradually settled into basins in places like Mianning and Yun Counties and developed the power of their gentry polity linked with various cities along the transportation routes between Yunnan and Burma (Ma forthcoming). This article argues that the ethnicity of the Lahu (拉祜), or Luohei (傣黑), people was created by the sociohistorical consequences of state penetration through political reform in the Qing dynasty, from the 1720s to the early Republican era. In this way, a frontier society based on ethnic politics was created by the Qing state, but the social consequences were mainly a result of long-term ethnic mobilization related to struggles with Qing officials and Dai chieftains. These changes led to the mutual dependence of diverse ethnic identities due to their different but colluding roles to become the Qing's frontier society. Through this frontier construction, political powers—including the Lahu, Dai, Wa, and Han—negotiated with one another, but they had also all interacted collusively with Qing state power for a long time on the Yunnan-Burma borderland. Through this mechanism, the Lahu people, as a cultural and political ethnicity, mobilized themselves and maintained their own system—the “Five Buddha Districts” (五佛五经)—on this frontier until the 1890s. This politicized religious movement significantly reconstructed Lahu culture and identity.

This article discusses how the Five Buddha Districts was at first a militarization system under the leadership of Big Vehicle Teaching monks, as well as how an elite family developed its hereditary religious power as E Sha Buddha, a kind of Buddha king, among the Lahu communities for at least four generations. This leader claimed a godlike power among the Lahu, but also performed another role for many years as the native chieftain representing the Lahu in front of Qing officials (figure 1).¹ The Qing officials' strategy was to allow the E Sha Buddha to control the mountain communities if neither the Qing officials nor the Dai chieftain could effectively do so. The Qing officials regarded the culture of the Lahu people as very different from that of the Han Chinese, but although they practiced a different economic system and spoke a different language, the officials were willing to listen to the words of these monks. Thus, monks like those from the Zhang family established their own administrative systems, dividing the whole West Mekong mountain area into several administrative districts like a centralized

kingdom. These monks-cum-political leaders still maintained their subordinate roles as low-level “local chieftains” (*tumu* 土目), however. They interacted with the Qing state for many years, until the Qing government finally destroyed the system in response to social changes taking place in Burma with the coming of British colonial power after 1885.



Figure 1. The silver hat of E Sha Buddha. *Source:* Heritage collection of Lancang County, Yunnan.

This article thus examines a particular political style that developed in the frontier context, a style that could be viewed as a political appendage to the Qing state from the 1790s to the 1890s. In order to respond to a series of academic theories about this frontier, cases like this should be considered in the context of the wider literature concerning state extension on the frontier or social encounters between different political systems on the borderland between China and Southeast Asia (especially between Yunnan and Burma).

Two types of scholarship with very different perspectives on topics like ethnic relationships, state power, and markets in this region are currently being produced. One group comprises scholars who are trained in Sinology, studying Chinese history; the other is composed of scholars who are looking at China from their training as Southeast Asianists. In the latter group, James Scott (2009) has contributed to a reevaluation of the social and cultural characteristics of mountain groups such as the Lahu, Wa, Akha, and Hani and their relationships with the so-called lowland state in highland Southeast Asia and Southeast China. Scott points out that, as the reach of the Chinese state expanded, these mountain peoples were either absorbed into the Han or moved away, often after a failed revolt. As this process was repeated again and again, culturally complex zones of refuge sprang up in the region's hinterlands. Scott developed the concept of "Zomia" to describe zones of refuge. Zomia was a non-state space based on certain ecological regularities and structural relationships that did not hesitate to cross national frontiers (Scott 2009, 23–26).

Tatsuki Kataoka disagrees, however, with Scott's claim that the Lahu are one of the typically stateless people of "Zomia" whose culture rejected the notion of a state. Instead, he argues that the Lahu became stateless and were conscious of the loss of their state after the process of modern state formation began. Kataoka claims that English-language scholars have misinterpreted this due to their inability to access the history of the Lahu (Kataoka 2013). In this article, I contend that the notion of a "stateless Lahu" did not exist in Yunnan either before Qing officials destroyed the Five Buddha Districts system or after. I provide detailed information about the rise and fall of the Lahu political system, showing how the state created the Five Buddha Districts and, further, how social agency attached this system to the state through negotiations with neighboring political-identity systems on the frontier between Yunnan and Burma.

In contrast to Scott and other Southeast Asianists, scholars studying China offer different perspectives on the junction between China and Southeast Asia and, more specifically, between Yunnan and Burma (figure 2). For instance, C. Patterson Giersch points out that the Yunnan-Burma frontier was regarded by American anthropologist William Skinner as one part of a "macroregion" market and urban system of China (Giersch 2011). Giersch observes that the circulation of goods (in particular, the circulation of copper and cotton) between Yunnan, South

China, Tonkin, and Burma—ignored by Skinner—was central to Yunnan’s economy during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Circulation involves more than just mobility or trade; it implies long-term relations created by repeated flows that transform society (Giersch 2011). However, in his earlier work, Giersch also argues that the frontier between Yunnan and Burma is a “middle ground,” because it contains places of fluid cultural and economic exchange where acculturation and the creation of hybrid institutions are contingent on local conditions. In this land, newcomers and natives adapted in order to manipulate each other. Meanwhile, the Qing never demarcated clear political boundaries along this frontier (Giersch 2006, 3–4).

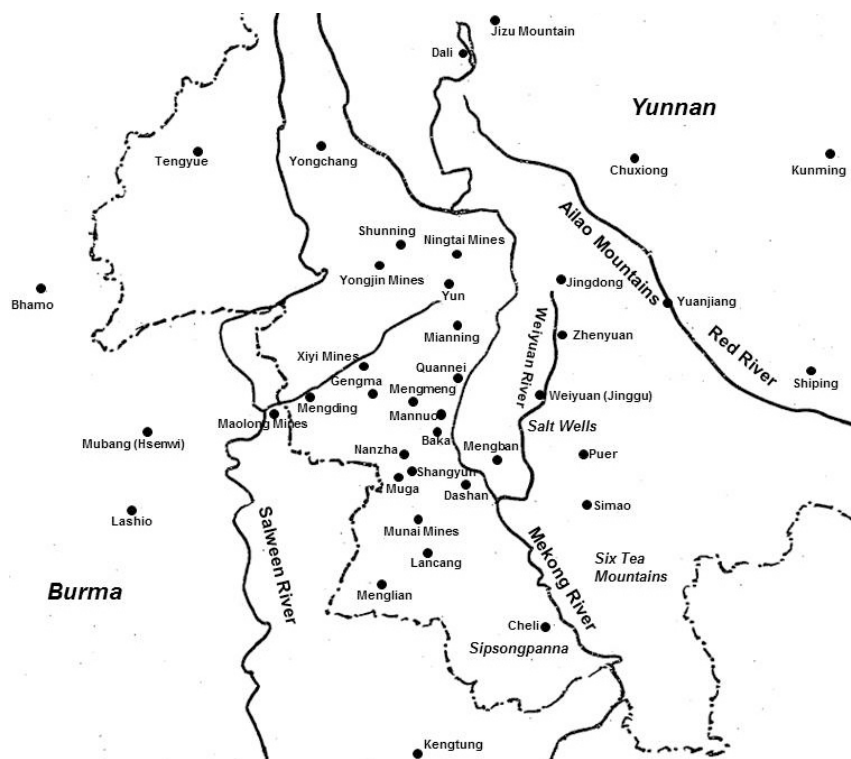


Figure 2. The Southern Yunnan-Burma frontier in the later Qing dynasty. *Source:* drawn by the author.

However, the ethnicity of the natives was closely linked with the Qing state’s policies. Additionally, the formation of the Yunnan-Burma frontier was a dynamic process, and clear boundaries were maintained between interior official counties and exterior Dai-Shan chieftaincies. The population included both the previous mountain peoples and the Han settlers

who worked in the mines or were driven away by Qing officials from east of the Mekong River to the mountains west of the same river in the 1790s. Together, the settlers established a political system based on their religious and administrative centers and whether or not the Qing government attacked them frequently or allowed them to work as local agency. But the mountain communities had maintained their own system for more than a century under the conditions that Giersch lays out, such as goods exchange and the increase and decline of the mining industry. However, Giersch does not mention the wars between the Qing and the Alaungpaya dynasty in Burma from 1764 to 1770, nor the decline in the mining industry in this region before the 1790s (Ma 2011). In this way, although the frontier was a zone in which multiple peoples met, it was also a zone of ethnic creation and the space of frontier agents. This zone was used in the Luohei's struggles and negotiations with the state and other local political systems for the political and cultural construction of Lahu identity.

Social Change and Ethnic Conflict in the Early Qing in Southern Yunnan

After the Ming government set up its administrative system in Yunnan in the 1380s, there were numerous revolts in central and western Yunnan. Eventually, the Ming government came to control the transportation routes and cities in the main basins. However, the region beyond the Red River, called the River's Exterior (*jiang wai* 江外), was under the jurisdiction of native Dai (*bai yi* 摆夷) chieftains. Because the Red River's inhabitants belonged to the category of "barbarian households" (*yi hu* 夷户), they were not required to register in the official county records or to pay land taxes to the government, even though they did pay taxes and corvée to their native chieftains (Huang [1922] 1968; Ni [1846] 1992, [1719] 2001). The Ming government exerted strict control over the security of the main transportation routes, but it had a different strategy for controlling the mountain areas (Ma 2013e).

Because of wars and the government's revenue policy changes, especially the change from poll tax to hidage (a tax based on units of land owned) in the late Ming and the early Qing, more and more Han migrants moved to Yunnan, causing demographic change in the inner provinces. Historian James Lee did a series of studies on the issue of population change, which showed that the Chinese population increased threefold during the early and middle Qing dynasty, from 150 million in 1700 to 450 million in 1850 (Lee 1982, 711). During this period,

the estimated population in Yunnan and Guizhou increased fourfold, from five million to twenty million, suggesting that some of the newly increased population had shifted from the inner provinces to the southwest frontier. Among those migrants, miners accounted for 10 percent in the 1750s, but increased to 30 percent—or about half a million—in 1800. In Yunnan, immigrants made up about 20 percent of the total population, about 20 million inhabitants (Lee 1982, 711). This demographic change was also bound with the political change in Yunnan. Before the Qing government carried out political reforms to integrate the native chieftain system into official counties (Gaitu Guiliu 改土归流) in the 1720s, large numbers of immigrants settled in southern Yunnan, especially south of the Ailao Mountains. The Qing officials realized that, with more and more Han immigrants settling in these mountain areas, social transformation from chieftain jurisdiction to the official county system would be accomplished. The political reform from chieftaincy to county was also facilitated by the implementation of a new system of taxation and farmland management. In order to make farmland freely available on the open market it had to be measured so that it could be easily bought and sold, and land tax was allocated to the new, individual owners (Ma 2013a). This reform attracted even more immigration from the interior counties of China.

Until the 1850s, resettled immigrants comprised more than 60 percent of the local population (Fang 2003). In parallel to the process of immigration settlement in southern Yunnan, the Qing government also extended the official administrative system based on calculations of possible revenue income, which could come from the tea and salt trade (YT 1840). From the 1720s to the 1750s, the Qing government in southern Yunnan reformed its salt policy in order to extract more income from the salt wells in the Weiyuan River area after the Puer Prefecture was established. In the 1750s, whole areas of Shunning Prefecture (figure 3), as well as the Dai chieftain areas west of the Mekong River, came under the same salt-consuming district (Dang [1904] 2001, 335). Meanwhile, the Yunnan-Guizhou governor, Ertai, established an official tea-selling system. After 1748, the government converted the tea-trade building into an official store and created a tea-coupon system similar to that used in the salt trade. Businesspeople had to first apply for tea coupons from prefecture officials, then take these coupons to the mountainous areas east of the Mekong River in Puer Prefecture to buy tea from the official tea store, and finally move the tea by caravan to other parts of China (Kun [1886] 2003).



Figure 3. Map of Shunning Prefecture, 1818. *Source*: Bo ([1818] 2009, 70).

Following the changes in salt and tea policy, which were enforced to control mountain resources, the Qing government carried out political reforms to abolish the chieftains. These reforms in turn seriously influenced the daily life of indigenous communities, such as the Luohei, Woni, Dai, and other communities along the Weiyuan River and in the mountainous tea plantation areas in the newly established Puer Prefecture.

According to a local saying, there was a process of “the Han driving the Yi [the barbarians] away” (*hanjin yitui* 汉进夷退) following the governmental policies of political transformation. However, this process also set the conditions for Lahu identity mobilization. The contemporary writing style of the Lahu was based on the writing of the Luohei (Ma 2013a, 5). Before being squeezed by the new settlers and the following social conflicts, the Luohei were still an insignificant group, according to local historical archives. The categories of indigenous people in the southern Yunnan mountain areas beyond the Ailao Mountains used to be defined by only two crude labels: the Cuan (爨) and the Bo (爨). For instance, “In Zhenyuan County,

local peoples are all of the Pu and the Luo. Their customs are based mainly on their loose ties with the officials. Because their lands are lean, the Luo barbarians rely on slash-and-burn farming” (Liu [1879] 2001, 341). Another archival document says, “The Kuchong is a branch of the Cuan and has been under the jurisdiction of Linan Prefecture since the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). Now they live in the Linan, Yuanjiang, Zhenyuan, and Puer Prefectures” (Liu [1879] 2001, 106). In the conflicts over local resources, more and more groups became involved with the Luohei and assimilated with them in a political movement or identity mobilization, starting with the first resistance movements in the 1720s. A new Luohei (the Lahu, as they call themselves) gradually absorbed many Han immigrants, and some of these immigrants became leaders of the Luohei and fought other Han or Qing officials.

Indigenous people mobilized around resistance, and, because the Luohei used to live in the mountain areas where many salt wells were scattered, they became the core and the largest of the rebel groups. The Lahu became visible in the movement, mainly through the political and religious system of the Five Buddha Districts (GZD, Bo Lin). Thus, we could say that “Lahu” was a newly shaped ethnicity that different parties joined. Meanwhile, the Lahu culture, subidentities, and social structures have also been reshaped, in the history of frontier formation, with their resettlement. The Lahu name was pronounced as *la⁵⁴ xε³¹* but written in Chinese characters as 倮黑 (Luohei).² In a local context, the pronunciation of “Lahu” and “Luohei” are similar, but when written as “Luohei” (倮黑), the meaning became negative and discriminatory.

In brief, in the context of social change since the 1720s, more and more indigenous groups, especially the Luohei moved toward the southern and western parts of the Mekong River from the Ailao Mountains and Mianning basins. Even though some of them still remained in the Weiyuan and Simao mountain areas, the majority of these resettled peoples were led by Han Chinese monks in the reorganization of their social order into something new. The place they inhabited was called the Luohei Mountains in the official archives (Cen [1897] 1989, 903). After the Five Buddha Districts system was established in the Luohei Mountains, this region also became known as the Upper Convert (上改心) and the Lower Convert (下改心), named by the monks, and covered both banks of the Small Black River (Xiao Hei Jiang 小黑江), which is a tributary of the Mekong River in the west.

The Five Buddha Districts System in the Luohei Mountains since the 1790s

Monk Yang Deyuan and His Followers

According to a document written in 1805, a monk named Yang Deyuan (杨德渊), from Jizu Mountain (鸡足山), a famous Buddhist holy mountain in Dali, founded the Five Buddha Districts in the mountains west of the Mekong River. Monk Yang's family migrated from Youyang County (酉阳) in Chongqing Prefecture in eastern Sichuan Province, which was one of several strongholds of the White Lotus (Bailiang Jiao 白莲教) religious movement in the 1770s and 1780s. Jizu Mountain was originally the base of the Big Vehicle Religion, which was created by a local scholar, Zhang Baotai (张保太), but in 1746 the Big Vehicle Religion was banned by the Qianlong Emperor, who deemed it anti-government. It then became a branch sect of the White Lotus movement and developed into branches of various Chinese secret societies. However, this sect has not been considered an orthodox Buddhist sect, because it combined Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian ideas for the purpose of its own political movement (Zhang [1751] 2001). Monk Yang Deyuan grew up on Jizu Mountain during the early period of the Qinglong reign and became a Buddhist monk there. Later he traveled in upper Burma as a wandering monk and temporarily settled in the Mubang (Lashio area, 木邦) region. After the wars between the Qing and Burma (Dai 2004), Yang Deyuan moved to the mountains along the Mekong River and set up bases at Mannuo (蛮糯) on the west bank and at Da Shifang (大石房) in Jinggu (along the Weiyuan River) on the east bank. After he came to the Luohei Mountains (figure 4), more and more Luohei, Wa, and Han people converted to his religion. As he was regarded as a Buddha, Monk Yang Deyuan also became known as the Monk Convert (Gaixin Heshan 改心和尚) (GZD, Shu Lin 1801a). In 1790, he set up his first base at Mannuo Village, dug a pool there, and then built a temple in nearby Nanzha Village (南栅). At these two places, he trained about 360 student monks over a period of more than ten years, several of whom went on to become famous in their own right: Monk Tong Deng (铜登), Monk Tong Wei (铜渭), Monk Tong Bei (铜碑), and Monk Tong Jin (铜金). After Yang Deyuan died, his most active follower, Monk Tong Jin, succeeded in his position. Monk Tong Jin built a close relationship

with Yangjing (杨经 or 杨金) on the eastern side of the Mekong River in the Weiyuan and Simao Mountains. The two men were the leaders of the future Luohei resistance (YST 1805).



Figure 4. The Luohei Mountains in the middle of Lancang County, close to the Munai mines.
Source: Photo taken by the author, 2012.

According to some local archives, Monk Yang Deyuan and his followers divided the Luohei Mountains into areas known as Upper Convert and Lower Convert, where they gradually developed the system of the Five Buddha Districts. Yang's third student, Tong Bei, moved to Weiyuan County to cooperate with native Luohei leader Yangjing to mobilize the Luohei along the Weiyuan River to occupy the Niujian Mountain (牛肩山) in Jinggu. Tong Bei and Yangjing also worked with leaders such as Zhana (扎那), Zhadu (扎杜), and Zhake (扎克) to fight the Qing army in the area of the Weiyuan River where the salt wells were scattered (GZD Le Bao 1797). This political resistance had been deeply influenced by the presence of Yang Deyuan's religious sect on either side of the Mekong River. The rebels first started their campaign against the government's salt policy in 1793 on the east side of the Mekong River, but by 1803, the Qing army had driven most of them away to the west side of the river. During those ten years, more

and more Luohei and other natives, as well as many Han immigrants, resettled in the Luohei Mountains (倮黑山) (Ma 2013a).

The Yunnan-Guizhou governors, Bo Lin and Yongbao, set the Mekong River as the border between the Luohei “bandits” and the inner counties by taking the Luohei people and the Luohei Mountains as the barrier between the inner counties and Burma:

It is difficult to cultivate the mind of Luohei bandits. The Shunning Prefecture is contiguous with Mubang (the Lashio area), separating the Burmese by the Luohei bandits, as well as by the Kachin, who serve as the barriers between the Yongchang Prefecture and the Burmese in Manmo (the Bhamo area), so the Burmese could not easily cross the Luohei and the Wilders to connect with the inner lands. (Bo [1818] 1901, 28)

The Qing government tried to manage the Luohei “bandits” into a human fence by driving them to the mountains west of the Mekong River, and they demarcated the Luohei Mountains with the inner land of Weiyuan and Simao Counties by the Mekong River in the 1790s, after resistance rose against the salt policies.

As more indigenous groups became involved in political resistance against the Qing government’s taxation reform policies from the 1720s to the 1790s, the alliance came to include Luohei settlers and miners from Jianxi and Hunan, as well as from some interior counties such as Dali, Chuxiong, and Shiping. This was also the time of the wars between Qing China and the Burmese Kingdom. The monks who followed the teachings of the Big Vehicle Religion also became active in the terrain between the chieftains of Mengmeng, Menglian, and Gengma, and their religious teachings quickly spread throughout the mountain communities. In brief, the Quan (圈) system in the mountains, which had been under the chieftains’ management and was based on the village heads’ leadership, developed into a new style under the hierarchy of temples and monks among the villages.³ Meanwhile, as a result of the new Lahu political system, the earlier mountain inhabitants, who were mainly from the Bulang and Wa communities, were clustered into the western Wa lands. The settlers refused to pay the Mountain and River Tax (山水银), which was based on a fixed ratio of Quans, to the Mengmeng and Menglian chieftains, causing waves of conflict. The chieftains frequently burned down newly built temples, but in 1790, the Dai official in Shangyun, under the Menglian chieftain, began to accept bribes sent by Monk Yang Deyuan and allowed the monk to build his first temple in Nanzha. However, the

Mengmeng chieftain continued to harry Monk Yang and his followers for many years, until the monks led their warriors against the chieftain and drove him out to Mianning. The conflicts were reported to the provincial governors, and then to the Qing court (YST 344–19–1960; Yang [1908] 1995, 359–361; GZD Yong Bao 1804: 4–1754–5; GZD Shu Lin 1801: 004958). Monk Tong Jin, who assumed the leadership of the Upper and the Lower Converts after Monk Yang died, eventually surrendered to the Qing government when the official army occupied the Baka fortresses on the west bank of the Mekong River in 1799. The Yunnan-Guizhou governor, Yong Bao, conducted a detailed investigation and reported the following to the Emperor Jiaqing:

Monk Tong Jin was a Han Chinese migrant. The Luohei refused to pay taxation to the Dai chieftains at Mengliang and Mengmeng, but they were prepared to pay this tax to Monk Tong Jin. Monk Tong Jin would like to help the government control the Luohei, and there are more than 20,000 villagers under his control now living in this area. Because he is trusted by the Luohei villagers and is powerful enough to negotiate with the Dai chieftains at Mengmeng and Mengliang, and because the Luohei people trust in his fairness, it still might be effective to issue an official title to him, which would allow him to control the Luohei for the government. He should reassume his old name, Zhang Fuguo (张辅国), be issued the official title of low-level native chieftain (土目), and be sent back to Nanxing (南兴) to be the Luohei official. (Zhou [1945] 2007, 13)

However, Monk Tong Jin led the Luohei attack against the nearby Dai chieftains and refused to follow the government order. This military action caused some Dai chieftains to complain vehemently to the emperor. The most serious complaint was sent by the Cheli chieftain (Sipsongpanna) who complained about the Luohei, who had gradually occupied some territories in northern Cheli. In 1812, Emperor Jiaqing sent an army to attack Upper Convert and arrested Monk Tong Jin, who was killed at Mianning in the same year at the age of forty-four (1768–1812) (GZD Zhang Fuguo 1813). After Monk Tong Jin died, his sons and grandsons continued to control the Upper and Lower Convert Mountains, based at their centers in the Nanzha and Mannuo temples.

The Five Buddha Districts system was based on the centralized religious and political power held by generations of this Zhang family since Monk Tong Jin, also known as Zhang Fuguo. According to some official documents and local archives, the Luohei people regarded these monks as gods. After more Luohei and other groups, such as the Lisuo (傈梭) and Laomian

(老緬), and some Han immigrants moved into Upper and Lower Converts, they reorganized into many mixed communities, and the former inhabitants, the Wa villagers, drifted away to the more western mountains (Ma 2013c). After the central temple at Nanzha was built, it became the political and religious center of Upper and Lower Convert. After the era of Monk Tong Jin, the Upper and Lower Converts were divided into several Buddha districts. The Lahu people called this system the “Five Buddhas and Five Scriptures” ($\eta a^{53} fu^{31} \eta a^{53} ki^{33}$, 五佛五经). This became the official term for the districts in the Upper and Lower Converts mountain areas and is still used today (Zhou [1945] 2007, 730). From the 1790s to the 1880s, this region, from Mianning in the north to Cheli in the south, gradually divided into four, five, and then six Buddha Districts. By the 1810s, its population had already risen to 3,000 household inhabitants (GZD Bo Lin 1813).

The Development of the Five Buddha Districts Based on Nanzha-Mannuo

The central temple at Nanzha was not only a political center but also a base for training young monks. Monk Tong Jin and his successors claimed that they were the reincarnation of creation god E Sha himself. According to myth in the Upper and Lower Converts region, E Sha was the creator of the world and a human being. But in Chinese documents, Monk Tong Jin and his sons and grandsons were known as the Luohei Taiye (倮黑太爷), a king-like chief. This master and great savior could be reincarnated generation by generation, sometimes disappearing, but then returning to save people from suffering. It is believed that all knowledge and skills known to people must come from E Sha. Based on this idea, Zhang Fuguo and his followers also set up the Nanzha temple as a school for religious education and leadership training (YST 1959a).

The development process of this Five Buddha Districts system, after the first temple was built in Nanzha, was gradual. Nanzha and Mannuo were close to the ferry point crossings of the Mekong River, enabling the monks to easily control the transportation routes from Mengban to Mengmeng and Mengyun (Shang Yun 上允), which linked the Wa mountains to Burma and the inner counties of China (Ma 2013c). These used to be the most important routes for goods being transported between various regional business centers, such as silver from the mines at Maolong and Munai, cotton imported from nearby valleys and from Burma, tea from the Dashan Tea plantations (大山茶), and salt that was produced at the Weiyuan salt wells and sold to the

mountains' inhabitants. Since the 1790s, this territory has been divided into four, five, then six districts: Mannuo was the subcenter for Upper Convert and later became Shuangjiang County, while the Lower Convert included the central Nanzha Buddha District (南栅佛), the Mengnuo Buddha District (勐糯佛), the Wang Foye Buddha District (王佛爷佛), the Kalang Buddha District (卡朗佛), the Dongzhu Buddha District (东主佛), and the Manda Buddha District (蛮大佛), although their names and territories could have changed over time. The leadership of the Dongzhu Buddha District was shifted to the Ximeng Mountain area by the last monk leader, San Fuzu (三佛主), who used to be a student of the Zhangs in Nanzhaand. The Ximeng Mountains area became the Meng Ka Buddha District (勐卡佛) in the 1880s ("Lancangxian dandanguan," Fu 1943).

Traditionally, a central temple was built in each Buddha district, and the leaders were secularized monks who had been sent there after graduating from Nanzha temple. These leaders were called the *jo*⁵⁴ *mo*⁵⁴, or the *khu*³⁵ in Lahu language, a term indicating that their authority was given by E Sha Buddha. There was also a position at the Nanzha temple called the La. The La was in charge of the central temple's public affairs. The best monk graduates were appointed to be Big Foye masters and took on the responsibilities of religious affairs, including organizing rituals and holding regular religious sermons for ordinary people. The monks who were most trusted by the great E Sha Buddha (the *fu*³¹ *zu*⁵³ *pha*⁵³) would become the *jo*⁵⁴ *mo*⁵⁴ and, eventually, governors of the Buddha districts (YST 1959b).

Regarding the levels of Buddha Districts, consider, for instance, the Muga Valley, where there used to be an important area known as the Mengnuo Buddha District in the southern part of the Nanzha center.⁴ The district central temple was set up at Mengnuo Village, and there were sixteen villages in the Muga Valley, which formed the district. In each village, a village temple called *fu*³¹ *ye*³¹, meaning the house for worshipping E Sha Buddha, was built (figure 5). A monk (*pha*³¹) or manager (*fu*³¹ *gua*³³ *pa*³¹) was put into position to look after the temple. Normally, these monks were trained at the district's central temple at Mengnuo, a second-level political and educational center for the district. In Muga Valley, all family heads in each village met every year at their village temples during the New Year festival to select their village heads (the *kha*⁵⁴ *jie*³³) under the name of E Sha Buddha. The village heads had to organize village warriors (the

*ma*³¹ *pa*³¹) into a band and collect grain as taxation from the households. All sixteen villages contributed taxes to the central district temple at Mengnuo Village, and the villagers gathered at the village temple and at the central district temple to celebrate the New Year Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival. As the district leader, the *khu*³⁵ went to the Nanzha temple regularly to attend meetings about military activities, seasonal agricultural arrangements, religious rituals, and so on. Like Wang Fuye (王佛爷) in the Dashan area and San Fuzu in the Dongzhu area, one of the famous *khu*³⁵ in the Muga Valley was Lord Xi (喜太爷). Lord Xi was an orphan in Fugo Village in Muga, but he was sent to Nanzha to be trained as a monk. Based on his excellent achievements at Nanzha, he was promoted and then appointed to be the *khu*³⁵ of the Mengnuo Buddha District. Thus, he returned to Muga as the leader. Lord Xi led the Muga army in joint military actions against the Han in Mianniang basin and against the Wa tribes in Upper and Lower Kunma (today's Kunma tribes in Burma), but he was killed by Qing officials in the 1880s. Another famous *khu*³⁵ in Mengnuo Buddha District was Lord Zhabu (甲布太爷), who led the Muga army to cooperate with San Fuzu in the wars of occupation in the Ximeng Mountains and then established the Mengka Buddha District among the Wa tribes (YST 1959b; Zhang and Peng [1959] 1981).



Figure 5. A village temple in Muga Valley, 1995. *Source:* Photo taken by the author.

Based on some official historical archives found in Shuangjiang County, in the former Upper Convert area, the leadership of Monk Tong Jin, or Zhang Fuguo, was inherited by his son, Zhang Bingquan (张秉权), and then by Zhang Bingquan's son, Zhang Dengfa (张登发). Later, Zhang Dengfa's sons, Zhang Chaowen (张朝文) and Zhang Shibao (张石保), inherited the leadership (Cen [1897] 1989, 901). It seems that the centralized leadership of the Nanzha temple and its branch at Mannuo Village in Upper Convert was under the control of the Zhang family for at least four generations, from Monk Tong Jin, through his male descendants, to Zhang Chaowen, who escaped to Burma in the early 1900s. Under the Five Buddha Districts system, all villagers had to provide their corvée and pay taxes. The Upper Convert village heads, or *kha*⁵⁴ *ɲie*³³, organized strong male villagers into warrior bands of three men each: one to carry the crossbow, one to carry the spear, and the last to hold the coutel, a short knife or dagger. These village warriors were known as the *ma*³¹ *pa*³¹ or *ma*³¹ *ya*⁵³, and their commanders were called the *ma*³¹ *pa*³¹ *lu*³⁵—meaning the heads of the warriors (*bing tou* 兵头). Weapons included arrows and firearms made in some Lahu villages, which could shoot to a distance of over 200 meters (Bian Weihui 1995, 41). The many well-known folk stories at my field site in Muga Valley about a wise man who used to be a warrior suggest that the village-based, militarized power deeply shaped the everyday lives of people under the Five Buddha Districts system.

During the period between 1856 and 1872, the rebel Panthay Muslim leader, Du Wenxiu (杜文秀), sent official seals to Zhang Bingquan at Upper Convert, which means that the Five Buddha Districts were under the leadership of, or in cooperation with, the Panthay government at Dali until 1872 (YST 1959b; Atwill 2005). Later, the Qing army arrested Zhang Dengfa and one of his sons, Zhang Shibao. However, neither man could speak the Han Chinese language, which was used during their trials; they could speak only the Lahu language, according to the official archives (Qiu 1948). This Zhang family's relationship also showed that the Five Buddha Districts system was not isolated from state governance and local politics.

The Five Buddha Districts as a Political Entity Attached to the State

For years, Han immigrants worked in the Xiyi and Munai silver mines, but when the mines were depleted around the turn of the nineteenth century, these miners came to work with the neighboring Luohei and Wa communities. Some of them developed close relationships with the monks who had set up religious centers at Nanzha and Mannuo and the miners had become deeply involved in the local resistance movements against the Qing government. However, many Han immigrants still wanted to encroach on the land of indigenous people from other interior basins like Mianning, or even from Jiangxi and Hunan Provinces (GZD Bo Lin 1813). The two categories of Han settlers also followed different patterns of localization: they either became local Han or became part of the Luohei system in the mountains. Monk Yang Deyuan and Monk Tong Jin were both people of Han descent, but they were leaders of the Five Buddha Districts system. Monk Tong Jin married, and his sons and grandsons became Lahu. Through each passing generation, the Zhang family stabilized its Buddha-king leadership and was recognized for generations as the reborn E Sha Buddha by the Lahu people. This historical memory is recalled in Lahu healing rituals even today, during the New Year Festival in Lancang and Shuangjaing Counties. The reshaped Lahu cultural and social system among different subgroups takes this understanding as core to Lahu identity in Yunnan, Burma, and Thailand (Ma 2013a, 167).

Because of the religious movement, increasing numbers of Han immigrants became Lahu. Some groups, like the Lisuo, Laomian, and Han, joined with the Lahu to become the Lahu of today. Some of their surnames, such as Bai, Tie, Shi, Ji, and Kong, could also be found among Lahu people. Even if surnames are not very significant in Lahu, since they can be taken from the father's or mother's side (Du 2002), they are still important historical reminders that show the complex origins of the Lahu people. According to local documents, the original Han immigrants who had converted to Lahu were known as the "Small Yellow Luohei" (小黄倮黑) (Zhou [1945] 2007, 730).⁵

Based on official archives and recently discovered records, the secret sect of Da Cheng Jiao was created by Zhang Baotai at Jizu Mountain in 1689 and quickly spread throughout many provinces. This sect combined Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian inscriptions to worship Buddhist and Taoist deities. It was eventually banned in the 1740s after Zhang Baotai died (Zhang [1751] 2001, 694). Other Han Chinese monks spread their religious beliefs among the mountain

peoples and mobilized people into a political movement against the Qing government. Through this movement, Lahu identity was reconfirmed and the boundary of Lahu ethnicity was enlarged to include more groups. At the same time, Lahu culture underwent reconstruction under the political system of the Five Buddha Districts. Through the Five Buddha District movement and their resistance against the Qing government, the indigenous societies in the mountainous areas to the west of the Mekong River had become well organized into a three-layered political system with a religious and political center. This system existed for more than a hundred years, from the 1790s to the early 1900s, despite the center being destroyed in 1888 by the Qing army. Even today, many Lahu people in Yunnan, Burma, and Thailand still practice this localized religious tradition, which originally came from Jizu Mountain. However, there is no significant reason to suggest that this system has any relationship with “shifting agriculture as ‘escape agriculture’” (Scott 2009, 191). Some Lahu practiced slash-and-burn agriculture in certain areas over various time periods, but most of them also practiced wet-rice farming on the mountainsides. Other Lahu were businessmen. They had all escaped from somewhere, but they had established a centralized political hierarchy since the 1790s.

Thus, the development of the Five Buddha Districts system was based mainly on the Quan model, through which the Mengmeng, Menglian, and nearby chieftains could control the mountain communities. In this grassroots political system, village heads were responsible for collecting taxes for the chieftains. But the monks promoted a different political model, based on their political ideals, through this Five Buddha system. In this way, not only was the centralized leadership of villages and districts, but also the cultural mechanism of a “Buddha-kind system,” was established. This system gradually came to be accepted among the Luohei and some of the Wa communities. In the wars against the Qing and the Dai chieftains, the militarization in these communities achieved its peak when warriors were organized to fight against the official army based in fortresses along the Mekong River, but their families were organized into different camps in the forest along the mountainside. The militarization also stimulated the later cultural integration of the Lahu (Ma 2011, 2012; GZD Shu Lin 1801). As a social and cultural consequence, the Lahu reorganized based partly on village terraced rice field agriculture and communal hierarchy, but more on the bilateral, nonlinear kinship system. This system constituted

a dynamic social institution that allowed all couples to be equal to other couples, but village authority over the equality of social units came from religious power (Ma 2013c, 2013d).

The Fall of the Five Buddha Districts System

Around 1882, Zhang Bingquan and his followers occupied the city of Mengmeng and drove away the Dai chieftain, Han Chaoding, to Mianning. Then they attacked the northern Han settlements in Mianning territory. In 1886, after the three Anglo-Burmese wars, the British army occupied the Burmese capital, Mandalay, and colonized Burma. This concerned the Yunnan-Guizhou governor, Cen Yuying (岑毓英), who tried to organize border negotiations with British colonial authorities (figure 6).



Figure 6. Chinese official with bodyguard during the boundary commission, 1899. *Source:* Photo taken by James George Scott, British Library, photo 92/1(67).

Facing the coming of British imperialism, Xue Fucheng, the Chinese minister to Britain, contributed his thoughts about the border issue to the Qing court:

International affairs should be considered as a positive negotiation. It is not correct if we think that some small pieces of land are not significant enough to

enlarge or reduce the area of China. During the Qianglong reign (1711–1799), the Burmese occupied some chieftain territories relying on its stronger power, whereas the areas outside the Eight Gates [Ba Guan 八关, claimed in the Ming dynasty] have been largely lost already. The border on the southwestern frontier is ambiguous. If we do not try to extend the border forward, the lands will be occupied by [the British]. (Xue 1971, 4)

According to Xue's strategy, if the Qing government had to draw a clear border with Burma, the first step was to extend the Qing government's territory. The Five Buddha Districts system had to be destroyed first to allow a county to be built in this area. These steps were necessary preparation for the later border negotiations with British powers in Burma.

In 1887, Cen Yuying sent the Qing army to the border between the Five Buddha Districts and Mianning County along the eastern Mekong River. In accordance with suggestions from local gentries in Mianning, on Governor Cen's order, Mianning nobleman Qiu Denfeng (邱德凤) commanded nine powerful families under the leadership of the Five Buddha Districts system—including the Shi family, who controlled the ferry crossing on the Mekong River in the Wang Fuye Buddha District, the Li family in the southern Lower Convert, and the Xiao family in the middle—to surrender to the government. The Qing government entitled nine new Tusi (inheritable native chieftains) to these families under the Five Buddha Districts system, but the Zhang Bingquan family rejected the call to surrender. In the following year, 1888, the Qing army crossed the Mekong River from Jinggu and Simao in the east, as well as from Mianning in the north. After that, according to Fang Guoyu:

In ten years of destruction, all Buddha temples and monks perished, [and] the centers of the Luohei rebellious movement were temples and the Fuye [Buddhist lords 佛主] were the leaders. Since Monk Tong Jin rose up in 1800, until the destruction of the Five Buddhas, the leaders were all monks. Therefore the general, Weichi Dongxiao [尉迟东晓], burned all the temples and killed all the monks. (Fang [1942] 2008, 115)

The endless wars that followed drove more and more Lahu people away from the Upper and Lower Converts toward northern Burma.

In 1888, after the Qing army crossed the Mekong River, the Zhenbian military county (镇边抚夷直隶厅) was established in the former Five Buddha Districts territory. Later, in 1895, the first border treaty between the Qing government and British Burma was signed. The Lahu had

long been regarded as a human barrier separating the Burmese from the inner counties. But after Burma fell to British colonial power, the Qing government had to adjust its policy of frontier formation and quickly set up a military county in place of the Five Buddha system in the previously Lahu-occupied region.

In summary, the Five Buddha Districts system was established by immigrant elites among the mountain peoples, but it was still a kind of appendage to the Qing state. The Qing state appointed and recognized Monk Tong Jin as a native official, but the Han gentry and Dai chieftains sometimes regarded him as a rebel bandit leader. Although it needed money to face the coming Western colonial power, the Qing government considered this recognition and its timing as a necessary strategy in order to control these territories. The Qing state therefore sent troops to destroy the Five Buddha system and build a new county, causing social suffering for the Lahu people through war and destruction. In this way, both the Zhang family and the Han heterodox monks worked as important state agents in shaping a polity outside but also attached to the state. The mobilization of Lahu identity and a political framework in the Luohei Mountains occurred outside the reach of official judicial power but was a political space adhered to the Qing empire. These monks used human agency to create a miniature state judicial system outside of the state, but they also worked to adhere the region to imperial state power. In other words, the Lahu and peoples like them have never been “freedom” or “anarchist” peoples who were separated from the state or who could keep the state at a distance, as suggested by James Scott (2009), even if the styles of the states were different. Why can we not just define the Five Buddha Districts system as a state-like polity attached to the state?

Conclusion

Some classical studies on political systems in the frontier mountains between China and Burma show that the Kachin's social model, which is based on the oscillation between egalitarian (*gumlao*) and hierarchical (*gumsa*) political forms, is a result of differing forms of compromise between two conflicting ethnic systems (Leach 1986, 292; Friedman 1998, 44). But the Five Buddha Districts system provides another perspective from which to review the relationship between the state and frontier society. First, it suggests that we cannot simply consider the Southeast Asian highlands as a very diverse region and review the details of how the

Chinese empire shaped the rise and fall of ethnicity and political systems. Second, it suggests that the highlands cannot simply be regarded as a stateless region or zone. As Francois Robinne and Mandy Sadan point out, the transethnic dynamic challenges the notion of “multi-ethnicity,” and ethnicity could be regarded as a cultural marker in this great crossroads (Robinne and Sadan 2007, 307). For peoples like the Lahu, this region is also a zone of ethnic *creation*. Many different groups have been mobilized and converted to become Lahu since the political reforms of the 1720s, when the Qing state expanded toward the southern Yunnan mountain areas to extend its revenue base to cover mountain resources such as silver and copper mines, salt wells, and tea plantations, as well as farmland on the frontier between Yunnan and Burma. The Lahu identity could be considered a historical mutual construction influenced by state power, as well as by the neighboring powers of the Dai chieftains, Wa tribes, and Han gentry powers, in the formation of the Yunnan-Burma frontier. This social reconstruction was based on a long-term mutual political mobilization, and it was deeply linked with the tradition of Chinese secret societies. The religious movement spread among the miners when the mining industry flourished from the 1730s to the 1790s. Its political influence also successfully spread over almost all of southern Yunnan and northern Burma before the outbreak of war between the Qing state and the Burmese Konbaung dynasty (1752–1885). Therefore, ethnicities like the Lahu did not simply preexist or come from being isolated, as in the case of the Kachin, nor were they simply based on a certain agricultural system in the mountains deemed as slash-and-burn or escape agriculture (Scott 2009, 187).

After reviewing the history of the political system of Lahu in the formation of the Yunnan-Burma frontier, we have a better understanding of the relationship between identity mobilization and different governances in Southwest China and northern Burma through exploring state attachment. Some important facts should be reviewed carefully, including the demographic changes in China since the sixteenth century. The large empire was managed on various fundamental mechanisms such as ideologically based bureaucracy, military power, a huge revenue system, and so on. Many cases show that another form of frontier management had also been practiced by state agencies, in the form of state governance, in Yunnan, since the Ming dynasty, both in the valleys and mountains. This understanding therefore can enrich our knowledge about the historical process of cultural reconstruction and identity mobilization as a

mutual construction with frontier formation. Frontier formation links with state power on one hand and native human agency for the state on the other.

It is hard to say whether the Lahu liked to keep the state at a distance through their “escaping culture,” or by slash-and-burn agriculture, even when they were in Yunnan, or in Burma under different state powers after the 1880s. If the term “Zomia people,” used by James Scott, suggests mountain people who could use their culture to keep the state at a distance, and if it is based on the condition that they had already acquired stable identities or cultural subjectivity before making their choice to escape in their everyday lives, the history of the Lahu and the formation of southern Yunnan do not match these criteria. As we learned above, the Lahu identity resulted from certain social consequences of frontier construction under different state powers. It was a mutual process between political groups and, regardless of whether they have many cultural differences or similarities or not, it is still possible to trace back the history of “where they come from,” and also to review the possibility of the correspondence between identities and political practices in the last several centuries. Monk Tong Jin and his Zhang family had been early frontier agents for the Qing state and acted as human agents in the reconstruction of everyday life among the mountain people, even though they were regarded as the reincarnated E Sha Buddha by the Lahu villagers. On the other hand, they were also regarded as native chieftains for the Qing officials, or they were appointed officials of the rebellious Panthay power, or were regard by the Mianning Han gentries as Lahu kings. This doesn’t mean that there was no relationship between their political practice and Lahu historical memory, and it is clear that the Five Buddha Districts system, as a three-layered centralized or state-like polity, existed in history.

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Notes

- 1 “Lahu” (拉祜) was written as “Luohei” (傣黑) in Chinese before 1953. In the native Yunnan Han dialect, “Lahu” has been pronounced as “Lao He,” which is equal to “Luo

- Hei” (傥黑). The Lahu called themselves *la⁵³ xo³¹*; in the local Han dialect, the pronunciation of Luohei is *la⁵³ xe³¹*.
- 3 The superscript numbers indicate the tones of the Lahu language.
- 2 In the areas controlled by Dai chieftains in southern Yunnan, such as in Sipsongpanna, Menglian, Gengma, and Shuangjiang, there were two different taxation units for basins and mountains. The *quan* (圈) was a taxation unit in mountains. The head of a *quan* was responsible for collecting taxes from several mountain villages of this unit for the local Dai chieftain, based on a fixed ratio. However, unlike in a basin, the chieftains could not control these mountain communities directly. A taxation unit in the basins was known as a *meng* (勐).
- 4 The Muga Valley has also been the author’s anthropological fieldwork site since 1995.
- 5 From the author’s field notes on the Lahu in Fazhanhe xian, April 10, 2010.

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