

# Shaping of the Yunnan-Burma frontier by secret societies since the end of the 17th century

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1934, when a band of soldiers was sent by the British colonial authority of Burma to the Northern Wa lands at Banhong, an area in the borderless frontier, a social movement was quickly mobilized. The Wa chieftains and local Han gentries, followed by the Chinese government, claimed the Chinese land rights of this undetermined area. The chieftain of Gan Se tribe, on the eastern side of the Salween River, went to Yuxi, near Kunming, to search for the tribe's ancestral tombs to claim Han Chinese origin, because some Zhao surnamed chieftains in the Wa lands had traced their founder ancestor to a Han miner at Maolong minefields, with the surname Zhao, who, historically, came from Yuxi. However, this tribe was still demarcated to the Burmese side later.<sup>1</sup> From the 1880s to 1961, the Burmese authorities and Chinese governments had tried to draw a border, crossing the mountain range between the Salween River and the Mekong River, using ongoing investigations and negotiations. However, the Yunnan-Burma frontier society had been developing historically over a long period of time, during which the indigenous Wa, Lahu, Han and Tai communities have been mutually constructed. Their interchangeable political systems and identities, as well as the networks woven for intermarriage, trade and immigration, could be traced back

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to earlier historical dynamics. But the development of secret societies linked with the minefields communities set up a fundamental shaping power and social institution for contemporary cross-border issues (Ma 2010a). For instance, in the last 50 years, the Yunnanese caravan businessmen, the KMT army, the Burmese Communist Party movement and the Lahu religious leaders have relied on a historical framework of cross-mountain networks to link Yunnan, Burma and Thailand into a regional socio-political system (McCoy 2003). The history of mines and secret societies provides a shaping base for the flux of human resources and goods in this region. Contemporary elements such as long distance caravan trade, marriage, religious and political movements, as well as cross-border migrants from Yunnan to Burma and Thailand, have seriously shaped the history of frontier formation. One of those important bases was the frontier society shaped by the miners' secret societies.<sup>2</sup> The history of this frontier sets the base for social categories; the crossable borders separated local society into parties; and the frontier people crossed the borders to do what their ancestors had done in the past.

Around the 16th century a new sectarian religion gradually developed in China and, until the 20th century, was well known as the White Lotus Religion (Bai Lian Jiao). By the 18th century it included very diverse sect organizations and activities. This religion, although based on popular Buddhism and Taoism, was outlawed by the Qing government due to its official orthodoxy and its tendency to violent political action. However, communities of White Lotus still grew in subsequent centuries (Naquin 1985). Different sects of the secret teaching slowly created a certain degree of integration among different groups and different areas, from the Yunnan-Burma frontier to inland China, and fellow believers shared at least a tradition of written texts, historical vision and a form of community organization that had an identifiable consistency across time and space. According to their religious practice, this kind of secret tradition had developed with the rapidly increasing Chinese population and the increased tensions between the Qing governors and local communities. It included some ideas of millenarianism, based on various written scriptures and congregational life. There were several sect founders, whose teachings were carried on by expanding networks of pupils, which fragmented the religion from the outset. Because of the lack of any overall religious organization, which encouraged diversity and the hostility of the state, the connection and coordination between believers became difficult (*ibid.*: 259). Additionally, as a team of worship practitioners, the assembly was central to the life of the members, and the sharing of a vegetarian meal at these assemblies was structurally necessary to the regular worship of their deities and a means of self-identification among the followers. Some sects incorporated gods from the popular hierarchy into their pantheon by borrowing the names of orthodox gods such as Guangyin, Confucius, Lao-tzu or the wise Kongming on Yunnan-Burma Frontier (*ibid.*: 289).

This research aims to review the history of Big Vehicle Religion (Da Cheng Jiao), a fundamental sect, later regarded as one of many sects of the White Lotus movement by some Chinese scholars and developed by Yunnan intellectuals at the Yunnan-Burma frontier after the 1680s, and its social influence in the Yunnan-Burma frontier. Fellow believers set up the original base at Jizu Mountain and then spread this belief into the terrain of the Yunnan-Burma frontier mountains, among the silver miners and ethnic



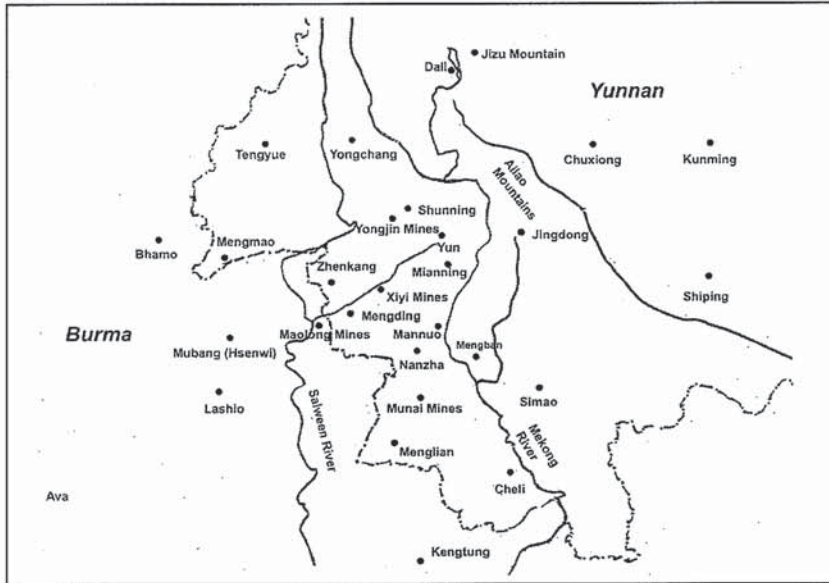
minorities. They developed this secret sect into a religious and political system in the western Mekong river mountain areas, among the Lahu and the Wa minorities and some important minefields. This movement successfully mobilized frontier society and reorganized local culture and identities during a period of about two centuries. The Yunnan-Burma frontier has been defined as a region of ethnic diversity at the edge of the Qing Empire. At that time local Tai aristocrats often maintained ties with Burma and Siam and the indigenous ruling practices were therefore subject to influences from multiple sources. The Chinese migrants brought in their organizing families, trading and exploiting resources. Based on these factors this frontier became a place of "middle ground" in which social boundaries and cultural practices were in flux, according to Giersch (2006). However, if we consider the detailed historical process of this complex dynamic between the Chinese Qing court, Burmese kingdoms and indigenous groups, it was not necessarily a "frozen" middle ground situation under the expanding Chinese Han migrants and the penetration of secret societies, which could have been far removed from the Tai aristocrats' governance or Chinese official administration. We are unable to define this terrain as an area outside the state. James Scott points out that the highland of Southeast Asia is a territory of Zomia, which means the entire population was, in a sense, not subject to any state (Scott 2009: 326). If we check the historical details of the Yunnan-Burma frontier, it is clear that the penetration of the states and diverse local governances have strongly shown that the concept of Zomia is not a functional term to explain the social characteristics and history of this frontier.

#### QING-BURMA WARS AND THE INCREASED HAN POPULATION IN YUNNAN-BURMA FRONTIER

In 1644, the Manchu armies occupied the Ming imperial capital, Beijing, led by the Han general, Wu Sangui. Then, in 1656, another Ming emperor, Yongli, was put on the throne at Zhaoqing, in Guangdong, by various Ming followers; but they moved to Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan province, until 1659 when General Wu Sangui's army arrived. The Southern Ming court escaped to the capital of Burma, as a refugee court. General Wu Sangui became the governor of Yunnan until his death in 1678 (Ni 1992: 516). In 1662, under serious political pressure, the King of the Burmese Tunngoo dynasty handed over the refugee Ming emperor to Qing officers, and allowed General Wu to kill him in Kunming. The frontier Tai chieftains were reconfirmed in their descents by the Qing court, according to Ming policy (*ibid.*: 522) and the social order of the Yunnan-Burma frontier quickly recovered.

In order to flatter the Qing emperor, Yongzheng, the Yongchang Prefecture officials reported that the Tai chieftain at Mubang (at Hsenwi) wanted to pay tribute to the Qing emperor, which inferred that this chieftain might betray the Burmese king, because the king did not want to pay tribute to the new emperor. Actually, it was false information from Burma. The Tai chieftain of Mubang was so angry about this rumour that he closed the trade routes to Yunnan, which created a serious cotton shortage in Yunnan markets. As in Ming dynasty, numerous Yunnanese peasants seasonally moved to the Mubang area to cultivate cotton, then moved the harvested cotton back. Additionally, they bought the cotton harvest from Burmese peasants. According to official

reports, the closing of the trade route had probably brought the weaving industry in Yunnan to a halt (Ni 1992: 616). It was clear that, even if the dynasties changed from the Ming to the Qing, for local Yunnan peasants and businessmen, their linkage with the Burmese still needed to be carefully maintained. Burma was the most important cotton provider for Yunnan weaving workshops.



Map: Yunnan-Burma frontier in Qing Dynasty. © Ma Jianxiang

After the transformation of the new Qing dynasty, many silver and copper minefields in the frontier improved their productivity. In 1722, the Yunnan-Guizhou governor, Ertai, reported to the Yongzheng emperor that the silver minefield at Munai, in Menglian Tai chieftain territory, had opened again, and the chieftain was willing to pay the emperor the mine tax for 600 *liang* per silver year. The emperor asked the mine to pay only half of this amount, which showed his kindness and consolidated the loyalty of the remote chieftains (*id.*). In 1745, the Qianlong emperor received a report about another nearby silver minefield. A miner, Wu Shangxian, who came from Shiping county in southern Yunnan, exploited a new silver minefield at Maolong area in the western part of the Munai minefield. Wu developed a friendship there with the Wa chieftain, Fengzhu. But some Ming political refugees, known as the Guijia (Gwe-shan), were also active in this area (Zhuang 1982: 270). The Ming refugees ran another silver minefield close to Lashio, which was known as the Bolong minefield. The owner of this minefield was Gong Liyan, who was regarded as the leader of the Guijia or Gui-shan due to their inter marriage with the Tai people there. However, Wu Shangxian and Gong Liyan were enemies due to their different political affiliations. In a battle between the two sides, Gong Liyan's army routed Wu Shangxian's miners in 1749, which pushed Wu into finding another way to become more powerful



(*ibid.*: 272). In order to connect with the Qing court, Wu made friends with the Burmese King and persuaded him to pay tribute to the Qing's Qianlong emperor. Under Wu's management, the King of Burma, Mahadammayaza Dipati (1733-1753), sent his representative team to pay tribute to Beijing in 1751. Wu Shanxian was viewed by Yunnan officers as just an ordinary minefield owner, even without his household registration at his hometown, and the officials were therefore angry about Wu's efforts to gain prominence. After the Burmese king's tributary, the Yunnan-guizhou governor arrested Wu and had him killed when in jail despite the fact that, in the years between 1745 and 1751, Wu and his fellow miners had produced more than 200,000 *liang* silver, the majority of which they had handed to the Qing government (*ibid.*: 274).

In 1752, under the leadership of Aungzeya, the Tunngoo dynasty was overthrown and the new Burmese Alaungpaya dynasty was established. In 1758, Alaungpaya occupied the Tai chieftains' territories on the frontier, such as Mubang, Mengding and Zhenkang. Gong Liyan, the chieftain of Guijia (Gwe-shan), was attacked by the Burmese, but he escaped to Menglian (Mengliien). Due to his political background as a Ming refugee, he was arrested and killed, by Qing officials, in Gengma (*ibid.*: 282). After the new Burmese dynasty was established, the old relationships with the Qing government were severed. The Tai Chieftains of Menglian (Mengliien), Cheli (Sipsongpanna), Mubang (Hsenwi) and Mengmi (Mong Mit) were frequently attacked by Alaungpaya. In the two years from 1764 to 1765, Burmese armies arrived at Cheli chieftain and Puer prefecture, which pushed the Qing emperor to declare war against Burma (*ibid.*: 287). From 1766, the Qing government sent armies to attack Burma from two directions: the southern wing approached from Cheli (Sipsongpanna) and the northern wing attacked from Mubang and Bhamo. The wars continued for three years, until 1769, but in 1770 a cease-fire agreement was signed by the two sides and the Qing withdrew its armies to Yunnan and resettled the Tai chieftains of Mubang and Mengmao in Dali prefecture. Later, in 1790, the Burmese sent a representative team to pay tribute to Beijing, then, finally, all trade routes between Yunnan and Burma were reopened. The wars cost more than 13,000,000 *liang* silver, which had serious implications on the financial situation of Yunnan (*ibid.*: 324).

It took both sides a very long time to restart long distance trade and to repair local networks during the dynastic transformation time, from the Ming to the Qing in Yunnan, and from the Tunngoo to Alaungpaya in Burma. In the frontier mountains, this terrain, especially in the area between Lashio in the north, Menggen (Kengtung) in the south, the Mekong River in the east and Salween River in the west, was a region of diverse and ambiguous borders of identities, cultures and political governances, as well as containing significant geographic features between basins and mountain groups. Even if the Tai chieftains in the frontier, such as the Cheli, the Menggen (Kengtung) and Gengma, paid their duel taxes to both the Burmese kings and the Qing government, the Yunnan local government interfered in chieftain affairs in the 1720s, more directly with the Cheli, Menglian and Gengme chieftains than with others. After the wars between Burma and Qing, more and more Han Chinese migrants moved to the minefields and agricultural lands in the mountainous part of this region, as well as to businesses in northern Burma. These changes seriously reshaped the political and cultural landscape of this frontier. The Lahu, or the Luohei in Chinese written

texts, became more visible because of the long-term millennium mobilization by Monk Yang Deyuan and his students, in the mountains after the war (Ma 2004, 2007, 2010b). However, these social mobilizations in the frontier mountain areas were deeply rooted into the tradition of Chinese secret societies. Therefore, a review of Chinese demographic change must proceed.

Since the Ming dynasty, huge numbers of seasonal migrants, businessmen and cotton workers, have moved between Burma and inner Yunnan. Many of them came from other provinces, such as Jiangxi and Huguang. After the 1700s, more and more Han migrants moved into the mountains beyond the minefields, due to the population increase in China and because the Qing government changed its revenue policies from the poll tax to hidage. In 1680, Zhang Yunsui was appointed Yunnan-Guizhou governor. Zhang sent a report to the emperor Kangxi about his policy for frontier transformation. He pointed out that:

Yunnan-Burma is full of mountains and lacks farm land, but there are rich mines. Not only local people rely on the mines, but also those migrants who come from Jiangxi, Hunan and Guangdong, Sichuan, Shanxi and Guizhou. The native barbarians don't know how to melt the ore, so they just work as coalsuppliers and also sell their vegetables and animals to the miners. The miners are mainly Han, and if they hear any information about a new mine found in the region of the river exterior, they will quickly concentrate at it. Normally the miners originating from Yunnan and Guizhou will account for 10 to 20 percent, while the miners who came from Huguang and Jiangxi account for around 70-80 percent. Miners active in the copper and silver mines number more than several hundred thousand; and some mines in frontier regions, such as the Xinglong mine in Gengma region and the Munai mine in Menglian region, were all exploited by the inner inhabitants. Therefore, those Tai chieftains and other indigenous have traded with inland people for a very long time. For instance, the cotton comes from Mubang (Hsenwi area) because there are no cotton plantations in Yunnan. Cotton could also be bought from Sichuan but that part just feeds the needs of eastern Yunnan. People from Yunnan's inner land are also hired to go to the cotton plantation at Mubang and then the businessmen will transport the cotton harvest back; besides this, some goods, like wood, elephant tusks, feathers, and mockmain (or "the wood cotton") all come from Burma. Some Tai chieftain lands belong to the Yongchang prefecture such as the Mengmao area, and because they are far away from the main salt wells, their salt is always bought from Burma. For the above reasons, people have moved in an endless stream towards the Burmese frontier. Some businessmen will return if they have made money, but others might lose money and became miners floating between the minefields, and it was historically this way even in Ming dynasty. (Zhang Yunsui 2003, Vol. 8: 683.)

According to James Lee, the Chinese population increased threefold from 150 million in 1700 to 450 million by 1850. In the same period, the estimated population in Yunnan and Guizhou increased fourfold, from 5 million to 20 million, which means that some of the newly increased population in the inner provinces had shifted to the southwest mountain frontier. Miners accounted for 10 percent of immigration in the 1750s, but this increased to 30 percent in 1800, approaching about 0.5 million. In Yunnan province, immigrants made up around 20 percent of its total population of about 20 million inhabitants (Lee 1982: 711). Before the Qing government carried out the policy of reforms of the native chieftain system (*Gaitu Guiliu* 改土归流) in the 1720s, there were already large numbers of immigrants who had moved into the Southern Ailao Mountains and Yunnan-Burma frontier. Some records show that more



and more Han immigrants who came from Zhejiang, Jiangxi, and Hunan settled in mountain villages, mixing initially with the non-Han minorities. Because Han migrants were consummate at exploiting the non-Han indigenous during their interactions, the Han finally took over the non-Han farmland (Wu 2003). Under the squeeze of newcomers, more and more native non-Han minorities were forced to move south to areas in the middle of the Southern Ailao Mountains region. Up to the 1850s, Han immigrants accounted for more than 60% of the local population (Fan 2003).

Along with traditional transportation routes, more Han immigration moved into the mountain areas between the Mekong River and the Salween River or to northern Burmese cities such as Wacheng (Ava) and Xinjie (Bhamo). Based on these changes, during the transformation of dynasties on both sides and the dynamics of the Tai chieftains on all sides, minefields in the mountains also became centers for businessmen and migrants. After more Han migrants penetrated into mountain societies, the identities of the Wa, the Tai/Shan, the Lahu and the Han became seriously mixed and reconstructed due to political mobilization (Ma 2010*b*). Especially under the impact of the Qing-Burma wars, the religious movement or millenarianism among mountain peoples became a sociocultural response to the chaotic transformations between the 1680s and the 1780s. In this century, local people experienced numerous wars, migration squeezes, food shortages and government exploitation in terms of increased revenues for war costs and so on. The tension and rapid social changes between the Han migrants and indigenous peoples set the conditions for the rise of religious movements. Some of these movements or religious sects were not banned during the Kangxi reign (1661-1722) and the Yongzheng reign (1722-1735), but were defined as evil or heretical sects by the following Qianlong emperor. One of these rapidly developed popular religions was the Big Vehicle Religion (Da Cheng Jiao, or Xi Lai Jiao), which set up its original missionary base at Jizu Mountain, then developed into an important branch of the later White Lotus Religious movements in South China. From the 1680s to 1740s, this sect successfully developed its cross-province network based in Dali prefecture, which linked the Yunnan-Burma frontier to Sichuan, Guizhou, Hunan, Fujian and Hebei provinces. It also penetrated deep into the mines and the indigenous minorities outside the official prefectures in Northern Burma and Southern Yunnan. On the one hand, it worked as political resistance against the Qing officials after it was declared illegal and evil; on the other hand, it also became an effective religious and political mechanism for identities and social mobilization, as well as a means of cultural reconstruction among the mountain peoples. As a newly developed millenarian sect, and based on the characteristics of secret societies, it was a flexible and dynamic ideology with a diverse style which fit with frontier minefields and non-Han cultures. Beyond the state jurisdiction of prefectures, secret societies contributed, with their millenarian ideologies, as a method for social mobilization.

#### POLITICAL INFLUENCES OF THE BIG VEHICLE MILLENNIUM ON THE YUNNAN-BURMA FRONTIER

In year 11 of the Qianlong reign (1746), an official in Jiangsu province arrested a group from a religious sect called the Flowery Dragon Assembly (Long Hua Hui), which was organized by Monk Wu Shiji. According to Monk Wu's statement, he followed

his master Zhang Baotai's teachings. Zhang was the founder of this new religion in Yunnan. The Jiangsu official reported to the Qianlong emperor immediately and the emperor required Yunnan-guizhou governor, Zhang Yunsui, to arrest all these monks and to ban this sect quickly and absolutely. Given this information, Governor Zhang arrested many important believers of this sect in Yunnan over the next two years, and reported his findings to the emperor. Later, more followers were arrested by officers in different provinces. According to official investigations in Yunnan in 1681, a local student (*Gong Sheng*), under the registration of the official Jingdong prefecture school in the Ailao Mountains in central Yunnan, came to Tengyue to study the teachings of Big Vehicle Religion with another student, Yang Pengyi. Zhang Baotai studied with Yang Pengyi at the Burmese border in Tengyue county, after which he moved to Jizu Mountain in Dali to recruit and train more followers. They claimed that the original founder was the Non-Origin Ancestor (Wusheng Laozu) from Treasure Mountain in Shanxi Province, and Yang was his forty-ninth generation successor, and Zhang Baitai was his fiftieth, so they were all "the incarnated masters".

Zhang also called his teaching "the correct sect, come from the West" (*Xilai Zhengzong*). In 1726, Zhang taught his theories to a Sichuan migrant, Liu Qi, and a Hunan migrant, Zhang Xiao, then sent them back to their hometowns to spread this belief. In 1727, Zhang Baotai was arrested and he died in jail, in 1745, when he was 86 years old (1659-1745). Zhang's teacher, Yang Pengyi, developed this religion in the Tengyue borderland, which used to be a base for the Ming political refugees who had surrounded the Yongli emperor earlier in the Qing dynasty, then escaped to Burma. According to Zhang Baotai's successor, Liu Qi, and other followers, the soul of Zhang Baotai had transformed into the body of Liu Qi after Zhang's death. Therefore, Liu could proclaim himself the Master of Spirits (Wangling Laozu), and he formally named their teaching the Big Vehicle Religion. They left Jizu Mountain in Dali and began to spread this religion everywhere. Liu Qi took charge of branches in Sichuan province, Ms. Wei took charge of Guizhou province, and Zhang Xiao was in charge of Hunan affairs. According to the Big Vehicle theories: 1) The followers of this sect can control three kinds of boats; the boat of teaching (Fa Chuan), through which people could be saved and transported from their suffering; the boat of epidemics, through which people may create disasters for others; and the boat of iron, through which people can control magical techniques. At different places, peoples could be safe if they were aboard the boat of the Big Vehicle teaching. 2) Based on the theory of boats, the followers could be easily organized. There were some heads of branches, and for each newly established branch, under the organizers, followers could be divided into four sections: the East, West, South and North sections. In each section, followers had to be divided into different levels based on their merits; the levels of Gold, Silver, Ice and Jade. There was a booklet issued by the branch heads; each branch should be established based on the number of followers and their names had to be on the booklet forms. Based on multiples of 3, an organizer could extend his followers from 3 to 9 then to 27, up to 3700; once his followers were over 3700, his branch could be promoted from the level of Gold to Silver to fill up with another 3700, as so on until it was promoted to the level of Jade. Finally, their boats could transport people past all suffering and disasters. According to this method, the masters of the Big Vehicle



Religion could recruit the estimated total amount of 9.2 billion people in the world and the masters, therefore, would become the rulers and masters of all peoples.

The most important assembly was the Fire Official Assembly, held on the 15th day of the fourth lunar calendar month. All heads of branches, called the fast heads, based on a certain period of fast, had to issue scriptures and small deity images to the followers. Normally these images were of Buddha and Taoist gods and goddesses. The way to accumulate merit could be through vegetarianism and the spread of religious belief to new comers through teaching them scriptures and singing songs. At Zhang Baotai's, in Dali, his family members also sold printed scriptures to followers, all of which were written by Zhang himself. They carved these texts into wood printable versions and for many years printed Zhang's texts as books. After the emperor Qianlong defined this sect as an "evil religion", 1473 followers were arrested in Yunnan province, including 848 male followers and 625 female followers. All heads were sentenced to death (Zhang Yunsui 2003). Of course, many followers escaped and became more secret in their mission, but later, in 1800s, this sect had become well integrated into the White Lotus Religion and mobilized many rebels in Yunnan and various provinces in China. In a period of 60 years, it formed a very big network that covered an area from the Yunnan-Burma frontier to the northern and eastern provinces. Due to its flexible characteristics as a secret society, the general Big Vehicle and White Lotus religions had created a new tradition of diverse Chinese secret societies (Ownby 1996).

In general, from the 1680s to the 1740s, Jizu Mountain in western Yunnan was the center of Big Vehicle Religion. Meanwhile, the Yunnan-Burma frontier was suffering from the social chaos of wars, mine unrest and a seriously increasing Han Chinese population coming from other provinces of China. Additionally, it was a period of rapid mine industry extension in the frontier mountains.

#### THE MINEFIELDS SOCIETIES AND THEIR NETWORKS IN THE MOUNTAIN AREAS

In order to increase provincial revenue income and to extend the bases of salt and tea taxation, the Qing government transformed the domains of the Tai chieftains into official prefectures in the southern Ailao Mountains after the 1720s. This serious political transformation created continuing indigenous migration from the middle of Yunnan to the western part of the Mekong River and northern Burmese mountains (Ma 2004, 2007). Therefore, more and more new migrants, including the Han, the Luohei/Lahu, the Woni and other mobilized peoples, resettled in the mountains between the Mekong River and the Salween River, south of the Mubang (Hsenwi) and Gengma Tai territories. These mountain areas gradually became known as the Wa Mountains and the Luohei Mountains. Rich silver and copper mines were scattered in the terrain and, in the Ming dynasty, began to contribute taxes to the officials, according to official archives (Liu 1991: 992). Some new minefields were opened, some of which were eventually exhausted, while other, larger ones are still working today. The Maolong Mine, the Xiyi Mine, the Yongjin Mine, and the Munai Mine, had performed extremely important financial roles for Qing state, which maintained a reasonable parity of silver money and copper coins. Therefore, the minefields in the

mountains of Yunnan were crucial for the stability of the national financial system of Qing state. In 1780s, the Xiyi Mine contributed a mine tax of 800 *liang* silver per year, and from the 1720s to 1810s, the Munai Mine contributed another 300 *liang* silver, in tax, per year, but Maolong Mine contributed 4000 *liang* silver in tax, per year (Lin 1965: 1146; Zhang Yunsui 2003, Vol. 8: 766). Before and after the Qing-Burma wars, the frontier silver mines absorbed huge numbers of migrants as miners. Some of them were natives of Yunnan, but most came from provinces like Jiangxi and Hunan, and the floating population among minefields normally exceeded several hundreds of thousands. For each big minefield like Munai and Maolong, there were over 20,000-30,000 miners. Among these Han migrant miners, some mixed with indigenous Tai, Wa and Lahu and very often changed their Han identity to become the Tai, the Wa or the Lahu (Ma 2010b).

In the 1730s, due to the exhausted mines in inner China, the Qing government needed to import copper from Japan, but faced diplomatic problems. In order to meet the need for silver and copper, Yunnan became the government's new provider and moved 1,700,000 *jin* (850 tons) to Beijing to be melted into coins (Zhang Yunsui 2003: 569). However, this amount was still not enough. Due to increased demand, in 1746 copper production had reached 7,400,000 *jin* (3700 tons) (*ibid.*: 706). Until 1810, Yunnan minefields provided more than 10,500,000 *jin* (5250 tons) of melted copper to the Qing state per year (Bolin 2009: 114). Besides the copper, the 16 silver mines also provided taxes to the amount of 26,550 *liang* (1.32 ton) to the provincial government, in 1781 for instance (Lin 1965: 1146). In one century, Yunnan became the center of the state financial system, providing almost all domestic silver and copper. But, we must be aware that these mines were dug, and the ore melted, in remote mountains by migrant miners, far away from the geographic political and market centers. Under these conditions, we should accept the fact that the frontier mountain areas were far removed from state politics. Meanwhile, we should also be aware that in these frontier areas there was a special governance style, which was quite different from the Qing system of prefectures and counties run by the entitled officials who were promoted through civil examinations and Confucian education. In simple words, the ethnic policies of the frontier mountains were quite different from the politics of inner lands. Scott defines this terrain as "Zomia", which means a tax free region of refuge beyond the state (Scott 2009: 23).<sup>3</sup> But here we find that the region has never been anarchistic or "not being governed" to use Scott's term, if we review the historical details. The idea of "Zomia" is not an effective way to describe and to explain social and cultural features of this frontier society and its relationships with Chinese imperial and Burmese political centers in history, and Chinese historical sources for regional historical study are necessary, even if this has been ignored by some scholars.

At these mines, between the Mekong and the Salween rivers, for example, at the Maolong Mine,

the principle of the miners was to treat miners as brothers. The older brother was the host of the mine, the second brother was in charge of daily organization and the third brother was the head of military affairs for protection. At the peak of its industry, the population was several hundred thousand. (Wang 1995: 214.)



There was a complex institution at the mines: Besides these big brother leaders, there was a clerk who dealt with all official files called the "historical clerk" (Shi), a manager in charge of the production flow of the mine called the "prefecture clerk" (Fu), and two others called "petty officials" (Xu). The ordinary management of a mine was controlled by a seven person committee including: a head of guests (Ke zhang), who dealt with human resources and visitors; a head of taxation, who dealt with tax related affairs with the nearby prefecture officials or Tai chieftains; a head of melting (Lu tou), who was in charge of the technical skills of the melting process; a head of cooking (Guo tou), who dealt with provisions, logistics and food related affairs; a head of bracketing, who was the manager of cave engineering; a head of caves, who was the supervisor of digging skills and direction; and, lastly, the head of coal, who was the manager of fuel and worked with the head of logistics, the Guotou. The most powerful one among them was the head of guests, because he must set up the basic principles for the mine and he has the final power of explanation of these laws. But this head was selected by all members of the mine (Tan 1990: 39-41).

The area around the mine eventually developed into a market town, with its hundreds of thousands of families. The nearby indigenous people moved their food, vegetables, firewood and wood coal there to sell, and caravan businessmen came to sell their rice, oil or even animals. Businessmen could set up their stores there, providing melting tools, religious papers and ritual tools, and some opera troupes also followed, providing entertainment.

Once its population increased, the groups became very diverse. Therefore, the miners organized themselves into parties of sworn brothers. The miners called the ritual to become sworn brothers "burning incense sticks", so that the brothers did not worry about giving their lives if their groups interests needed them to. They had their own styles of rituals and morals, which were different from that of the Confucius saints'; they did have a sense of right and wrong, but this was different from that of the Confucius saints' too. (Wang 1995: 213-214.)

In general, the greater degree of social cohesion was primarily due to the high degree of floating laborers between the minefields. The relationships between minefield society and the native indigenous population were mainly based on the social institution of religious belief. It was a system of organizational rituals, but was different from the official Confucius moral-based system, which was regularly practiced by officials and promoted by Chinese states. Moreover, the Qing government allowed its existence. The occupants of cave mines sold their ore or melted product to businessmen. They would then pay 12%-15% of the produced silver to the tax head at the mine, as official tax. After that, they also needed to pay management fees, called the "spreading" (sa san), to support public necessities at the minefield, including salaries for clerks and the heads, and training fees of new miners, as well as the fees for water and caravan transportation between the minefield and the cities. Additionally, another important cost which also needed to be shared by the caves owners and miners was the running cost of the temples at the minefield. The remaining profits could then be shared by the owners, based on the shares of investment in the opening of the mine or the cave. They came to the mine to make money; they were organized based on sworn brotherhoods; and they organized themselves into a minefield operation (Lin 1965: 1150).

But the miners rejected any official visits to their minefields. All mines had a law that no official body could visit the minefields and the miners had their autonomy. Miners had learnt through experience that an underground mine was just like floating water, it could appear here or there, or could simply disappear. The mine deposit were “floating” and out of control. Therefore, worshiping the mine god was the only way of keeping good luck. In Chinese tradition, the mine god is a dragon god known by the title of “The West Gold Heave Emperor”, but people believed that this dragon god was previously a Tai chieftain, not a Han Chinese. Of course, the Tai chieftains were scared of all Han Chinese officials. The result was that, if the officials came to the minefields, the dragon god would escape or hide and the whole mine would therefore collapse. That was the reason why officials could not go to work at the minefields, and it was a well accepted tradition in the Yunnan-Burma frontier, based on the religious beliefs of the miners (Tan 1990: 39-41). Therefore, there was a well accepted sense that mines should be self-disciplinary systems. The Qing government would not intervene in its running, but was willing to accept the revenue income from the mines without the usual administrative costs, so they did not care very much about the mines’ autonomy. When Yunnan-Guizhou’s governor, Zhang Yunsui, wrote a report to the emperor he said,

For more than one hundred years the minefields have maintained their system very well, wherever the minefields are located, whether at inner prefectures or frontiers. There has never been chaos at the mines and the system is so good that, because through it the wealth of the barbarian frontier can be used by the poorer inner lands, it benefits the whole county. (Zhang Yunsui 2003, Vol. 8: 766.)

That is the reason for the complicit understanding between the Qing government and the hosts of the minefields. On one hand, the hosts had to pay their required and fixed taxes to the officials. On the other hand, they could keep their authority of governance at their minefields, but this power was mainly linked with the characteristics of floating people as well as floating ore.

In this way, the case of the Lahu’s Five Buddha Districts was significant in the understanding of secret societies among the miners and nearby natives in the mountain areas. The social environment provided by the mines was fertile soil for the cultivation and harvest of secret society fruit. Meanwhile, the secret societies provided the social institutional methods for organizations, such as the minefields. People moved and floated between the inner land and the frontier. The mines were bases for networks and wove ethnic minorities with marginal Han migrants into their nets, which could be flexible and extend to northern Burma as well as to any part of China. After the minefields were exhausted, or the mines were closed for whatever reasons, the miners and their social influences were easily absorbed into neighboring indigenous societies. As mentioned above, for example, a Zhao surnamed miner married a Wa woman and this family provided the chieftains of Gan Se in today’s Wa state in Burma, and the monks, who acted among the miners became leaders of the Lahu, and the whole religious network reconstructed the Lahu society in the following century. The mines, secrets societies and non-Han ethnic minorities had mixed together to become a dynamic frontier society between the Qing officials and the Burmese



kings, as a representative party of the whole terrain between the Mekong River and the Salween River.

#### THE FIVE BUDDHA DISTRICTS SYSTEM IN THE LUOHEI MOUNTAINS

According to some preserved stone inscriptions found at Munai Mine, and various other documents, the Qing-Burma wars seriously damaged this and nearby mines. There were numerous miners at the Bolong Mine and the minefield used to be a big industrial town. In 1760, when the war broke out, all miners and businessmen escaped and the whole town quickly became ruins (Zhou 2003, Vol. 8: 784). On the other side of this mountainous terrain, close to the Mekong River, the Munai Mine was also damaged, but it recovered quickly. The stone tablet inscription states that, as early as 1714, a monk had actively organized the collection of donations from people in the minefield; it took three years and cost more than 1,000 *liang* silver to rebuild a luxurious dragon temple.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the whole mine was destroyed by the Burmese army in 1767. The miners returned and rebuilt the temple again in 1776, and a student from Chuxiong was recruited to write the text of this inscription, which was carved by a stonemason who came from Dali prefecture. The inscription shows that many caravan businessmen also returned, with some new migrant miners and the mine became very prosperous again after the war. The native Luohei/Lahu and the Wa got involved in mining affairs when some monks settled at the mines. A monk, whose surname was Wang, known as Wang Foye, began to convert the Luohei and the Wa, as well as spread his teaching among the miners. This Monk Wang had been involved in the renovation of the Dragon God temple at Munai minefield. After that he built another temple at a nearby Luohei village and later became a leader of the Luohei's millenarianism. He died in the 1850s according to local documents.<sup>5</sup> Before Monk Wang, another monk, Yang Deyue, who originally came from Jizu Mountain, had set up his religious teaching base between the two centers of the Munai Mine and the Maolong Mine, close to the Mekong River.

Before the coming of Monk Wang Foye, Monk Yang Deyuan had already arrived to increase his sect, after the Jizu Mountain based sect of the Big Vehicle Religion was banned by the Qing government. When Qing officials arrested Zhang Baotai's followers, some of them escaped to Burma and to the frontier mines. According to a document written by a follower of Monk Yang Deyuan, Monk Yang came from Youyang county, which was a remote county, with a concentrated population of the Miao minority, on the border between Sichuang and Hunan provinces. This area was also a long-term base for the White Lotus Religious movements from the 1760s to the 1810s. When Yang Deyuan was a child, he moved from his Youyang hometown to Jizu Mountain, grew up there and became a monk there. Later, after the sect of Big Vehicle Religion was declared evil by the government, he traveled to Mubang (Hsenwi) and many other places in Burma. When he was old he settled at Mannuo village in eastern Mekong River, and built a temple at Nanzha village. His teaching was a mixture of Buddhism and Taoism, as well as Confucianism. He was very familiar with "Buddhist scriptures, Taoist rituals and the Confucius ideas of justice, humanity, ritual, wisdom and letter" (Ma 2010b). Monk Yang Deyuan built the Nanzha temple in 1790 and passed away in 1805. During his 15 years in the Luohei Mountains, between the two

mines of Munai and Maolong, he trained about 360 students, but from among them the most famous four were: Monk Tong Jin, Monk Tong Deng, Monk Tong Wei and Monk Tong Bei. His first student, Monk Tong Jin, became the king of the rebellious Luohei/Lahu after Monk Yang Deyuan died.<sup>6</sup> Monk Tong Jin resumed his Han name of Zhang Fuguo in order to become an officially entitled chieftain of the Luohei/Lahu for a short time in 1805, but he later rebelled again. Until 1920s, the Zhang family, sons and grandsons of Zhang Fuguo, had been the god kings on Lahu Mountain, called E Sha Buddha, generation after generation, by the Lahu people.

Based on some verifiable official documents, many Han Chinese migrants moved to the Yunnan-Burma frontier mountain areas to be miners and many of them became cotton businessmen. They hired peasants to cultivate cotton in northern Burma and moved the cotton back to Yunnan for weaving. Monk Yang Deyuan and his students, Monk Tong Jin (Zhang Fuguo), Monk Tong Deng and others, gradually established a large religious authority known as the Buddha Districts system which, in Lahu, was "the Five Buddha and the Five Scriptures". When Zhang Fuguo became the Luohei/Lahu king he invited a Jiangxi cotton businessman, Yu Fengming, to be his secretary in 1811,<sup>7</sup> but Zhang was arrested by Qing officials and killed in 1813 when he was 44 (1769-1813). When Monk Yang Deyuan built his temple at Nanzha, Zhang Fuguo was a young man of 21. After 1790, many Han Chinese migrants penetrated deeply into the indigenous minorities becoming their leaders to fight against the Qing government or other parties of Han Chinese immigrants. Meanwhile, they had given up their Han identity to become Lahu, and were regarded as the masters of knowledge because they knew everything according to the Lahu myth, and were regarded as the creative god, E Sha Buddha. People like Yang Deyuan, Zhang Fuguo and Monk Wang, "these kinds of monks were numerous and active in this area, not only in the territory of the Mengmeng Tai chieftain. In the area of Menglian, Liukun (today's Cuiyun district), and Mengban (today's Jinggu county), these monks could be found everywhere. The natives like the Luohei, the Tai and the Bulang respect them like gods."<sup>8</sup> Through their efforts from the 1790s to the 1890s, the western Mekong Mountains became known as the Luohei Mountains. The Munai minefield was closed by the Qing government due to the Luohei rebellions in 1815, when the Five Buddha Districts system was established in this area. After Zhang Fuguo came his son, Zhang Bingquan, grandson, Zhang Dengfa, and Zhang Dengfa's son, Zhang Chaowen; for four generations this family's descendents continued to claim to be the reborn E Sha Buddha, the master and the creative god in Lahu myth. This idea was based on the belief in the reincarnation of the soul of E Sha Buddha, but the family's descendents maintained stable control over the Luohei Mountain for more than a century. The whole region was divided into five or six "Buddha Districts"; in each district a regional central temple was built as the center of administration and the monks' schooling. Under the authority of the district temple, each village had its own village temple which was run by a monk. The village head was also selected by the villagers at the temple. Their village warriors were led by the village heads, and every three warriors were organized into a fighting band. Under the leadership of the central temple the Lahu warriors fought with the Qing official, the Tai chieftain or the Han gentries for different reasons, but kept their political territory, known as the famous Luohei Mountain in the eastern part of Mekong River. Some Wa tribes and Tai



chieftains also joined with this Five Buddha Districts system, from the 1880s to the 1920s, to stand against the coming of British and Chinese governmental forces. The villagers needed to pay taxes to the district central temples. They had their assembly at the central temples, but the original center was the Nanzha temple, which was controlled by the "lahulized" Zhang Fuguo family (Ma 2007).

What we need to pay attention to here is that it was not a system based on orthodox Buddhism. When the Qianlong emperor issued the order to arrest the "evil religious followers" at once, thousands of them were put into jails but many of them were still very active among the miners and in the areas outside official jurisdiction. When the Qing officials issued their order on how to define who "the real evil believers," were, there was a sign: they always had an assembly on the 15th day of the 4th lunar month. According to my field work data and diverse investigation reports, and according to Lahu tradition the E Sha Buddha came from Jizu Mountain. All scriptures and deity images were taken from Dali, and there were only two occasions when all the villagers needed to eat vegetarian food and worship E Sha Buddha, on the 15th day of the 4th and 8th lunar months. On these two dates, everyone should assemble and dance together, listening to the speeches of E Sha Buddha about how to respect the religious principles and how to practice agriculture. In 1888, the Qing army crossed the Mekong River and, since then, this frontier mountain area has no longer been regarded as ambiguous because the Yunnan government negotiated the drawing of the border with British colonialist, who had occupied upper Burma since 1885. However, the Luohei/Lahu continued to resist until the 1920s. The Qing government demolished the Five Buddha Districts, killed almost all the monks and burned down all the temples in the ten years before the Qing dynasty was destroyed. These conflicts and killings pushed the Lahu people to continue moving from the western Mekong River to Burma and Thailand (Ma 2004).

Social chaos and serious conflicts made it difficult to find a series of historical documents about the change and spread of the secret society, and its detailed progress among the Lahu people. It has become a collection of mythological rituals about souls and the world of the dead in Lahu culture, which put the history of the Yunnan-Burma frontier into another setting in terms of cultural meaning. However, we could surmise that the characteristics of secret societies and the Big Vehicle Religious tradition were dramatically adjusted and changed, generation by generation, under the manipulations of its masters. It had been a dynamic process in the history of this frontier, to fit in with a non-Han Chinese culture. This change also mixed with the shifting of people's identities, which got swept up in the tide of resistance and social mobilizations over two centuries. The Big Vehicle Religion did later become a branch of the White Lotus Religion, but it was developed separately, in different areas in China, by diverse means. At the Yunnan-Burma frontier, this sect was still very active, and continuing reports always mentioned that many people still practiced the secret teachings:

The teachers of the White Lotus Religion are known as the heads of vegetarianism. The followers and believers need to be long-term vegetarians and to worship Buddha. They set up their vegetarian assembly and hundreds of believers will be at the gatherings. There are several assemblies in Yun county (north of the Lahu areas, in the eastern Mekong River), such as in the county seat and at townships like Maolan and Yueya. Their theories are very

secret, and were banned many times, but the followers and believers still practice their missionary secretly. They even renamed it the Religion of Returning Roots (Gui Geng Jiao).<sup>9</sup>

## CONCLUSION

If we want to discuss the historical construction of the Yunnan-Burma borderland, the sociocultural dynamics and the flows of meaning about this borderland, the crucial factors might be the influences of Britain colonialism as well as the Qing governmental strategies. But, before the colonial era, another historical background was very important: how did Chinese Ming and Qing states set the conditions for local frontier societies? And how did these factors shape the social and cultural characters of frontier societies, as well as the dynamics of ethnic identities, before the borderline was drawn? This cannot be established if we do not review the detailed historical process, and check these very diverse social relationships, such as with the rebels, the state-like systems outside the state, and the development of secret religions based on the long Chinese tradition of secret societies. Briefly, three themes of population increase, Yunnan-Burma trade and the mine industry set the background of historical linkage for the mobilization of ethnic identities and multiple governance outside the states' jurisdiction, not only on the side of the Chinese state, but also for the Burmese along this historically constructed frontier terrain. Moreover, it doesn't matter whether the minefields were far away or not from the political centers, there were huge floating population between these minefields organized by certain mechanisms such as secret societies. These floating miners, with their religious power, could also spread into the indigenous peoples. This was a long-term tradition during the Ming and Qing. Since then, the traditional and cultural institution of secret societies has successfully spread its religious ideologies and organizational methods into frontier society. These social mechanisms had been deeply integrated into indigenous societies in their social mobilization, political organization, cultural reconstruction and identity transformation. Normally, these things could also be regarded as political resistance against the state, or as cooperating with the state to a certain degree.

Thus, the cross-border, long distance trade, the minefields deep in the mountains and the political governance far away from centers like Kunming, Dali, Yongchang, or Ava, Lashio and Bhamo, could be evidence of some social characteristics of traditional frontier society before the colonial era. Secret societies did not make frontier people escape from state governance like James Scott and other scholars' assume, but rather wove frontier peoples, like ethnic minorities, miners, businessmen and migrants, together on the one hand and made this secret network into centers of state politics on the other. They are two sides of the same coin. Both the White Lotus Religion and the Big Vehicle Religion were two central issues in Chinese Qing imperial politics. They were never outside state governance. Some of them were active at the minefields as social catalysts keeping the political balance with the state center at this frontier. The frontier space was considered acceptably autonomous by the Qing state. It could be a dynamic and a complicit balance, but it was still a style of politics of frontier governance.

The wars between the Qing state and Burma kingdom were another shaping power of frontier politics. The Qianlong emperor and Qing officials seriously considered the



meaning of the Burmese king's tributary as the highest politics, due to the state ideology of "the only empire under heaven" and treated Burma as a tributary vassal state. Therefore, the Qing government did not allow any local level of active participation such as that of Wu Shanxian, who was always regarded as a low level, insignificant trouble maker but useful to the officials sometimes. In this way, the frontier people were still kept on the margins of politics, they were rejected by the state even if they wanted to join in the affairs of state governance. It was the state that rejected them, even though they were eager to join in directly with state politics. The state officials seemed so superior to the ordinary peoples, which makes the famous Chinese saying true: "The sky is so high and the emperor is so far away (Tian Gao Huangdi Yuan)." In this way, the minefields could keep their autonomy and the secret societies could find their place there, and this kind of place could also be found among the Luohei/Lahu people. As the governors said, "Using frontier wealth to fill the gap left by inner land shortages" need not only apply to the field of economics, but also to the field of politics, when the state considered it necessary as, for example, when the state needed to negotiate with the British about the borderline. But it should be based on the willingness and ability of the state power at different times, rather than on the willingness of the frontier peoples. Linking all of these relationships together, we could remark that some diverse governances outside the state officials were linked with the state power, but these governances had been manipulated within a certain frontier space. All of these political activities set the conditions for the mutual creation of the identities of the Wa, the Lahu, the Tai and the Han Chinese, under the framework of different states, from the Ming to Qing and from the communist state to Burma.

## Notes

1. Zhang Shian, "The General of the Undetermined Border Region between China and Burma", Lancang Archives, 154-3-064-089; 1952. This research project was partly granted by the RGC Direct Allocation Grant of Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and by University Grant Committee-Area of Excellent Scheme: The Historical Anthropology of Chinese Society. The author's special thanks go to Prof. Du Shanshan and Prof. Ho Ts'ui p'ing for their comments on the earlier version of this paper.
2. About the cross border movements and historical background of this area, see also: Fiskesjö (2000), Hill (1998) and Giersch (2006).
3. Magnus Fiskesjö also has different review about the debates on "zomia", see his recent research (Fiskesjö 2010). To summarize James Scott's theory of "Zomia" as "a tax free region of refuge beyond the state" may be too simplistic. The Yunnan-Burma frontier was a central issue in Qing state politics, there is a need to clarify the conditions of the area before being able to apply the term "Zomia" to it.
4. The Inscription of Innovation Xianren Carve Temple, in Pan Chunhui (1989: 175).
5. 张新华, "佛教王佛爷在澜沧传教活动和三佛祖进西盟的概况", 《民族理论文集》, 第五辑, 思茅, 1987, 242页。See also Missionary Activities of the Buddhist Wang Foye in Lancang and San Fozu's Entry into Ximeng, in *Collected Papers on Ethnological Theory*, Vol. 5; Anthony R. Walker (2003) and also 《思茅拉祜族传统文化调查》, 思茅行署民族事务委员会, 昆明: 云南人民出版社, 1993, 页255.
6. Monk Guangyuan (1805).
7. 武内房司, "一九世纪前半、云南南部地域における汉族移住の展开と山地民社会の変容", 塚田诚之编, 《中国国境地域の移动と交流》[(Shigeyuki Tsukada, 2010). Japan. 页 117-143.

8. 转引自武内房司, “一九世纪前半、云南南部地域における汉族移住の展开と山地民社会の変容”, 塚田诚之编, 《中国国境地域の移动と交流》[(Shigeyuki Tsukada, 2010). Japan. 页142.
9. *The Gazetteer of Yun County in the Republic*, Yunnan: Yun County, 1983, pp179-180. (《(民国)云县志》(1943), 云南云县县志办公室重印, 1983, 页179-180, 卷四, 归根教.)

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**Abstract:** After the 1680s, Big Vehicle Religion gradually developed on the Yunnan-Burma frontier. It was banned by the Qing government and became a sect of Chinese secret societies. The founders of this religion combined various Buddhist and Taoist elements together and claimed this to be the route to their salvation. They also trained many students to be monks. After the Sino-Burma wars these monks established a Five Buddha Districts system among the Lahu and some Wa villages in western Mekong River, until the system was destroyed by the Qing government in the 1880s. The monks became leaders of the Luohei/Lahu through millenarianism and many Han immigrants also became involved in the movements to become the Lahu or the Wa. The monks performed critical roles as social activists in Lahu cultural reconstruction. As a shaping power, their human agency was deeply integrated into secret societies and they formulated regional political centers as well as a network mechanism for the floating indigenous populations. Secret societies clearly shaped a historical framework for local politics and economic flux in the Yunnan-Burma frontier and became a cross-border mechanism for contemporary life after the border between Yunnan, Burma and Thailand was decided. However, it used to be a networking dynamic linked with silver and copper minefields, Sino-Burma wars, and anti-Qing millenarianism. Local people could also use this frontier space for their negotiations with different states before the coming of European colonialism.

*Comment les sociétés secrètes ont façonné la frontière birmano-yunnanaise*

*Résumé:* Après les années 1680, le bouddhisme du grand véhicule se développa sur la frontière birmano-yunnanaise. Le gouvernement des Qing l'interdit mais il devint une secte diffusée par des sociétés secrètes. Les fondateurs de cette religion combinèrent des éléments bouddhistes et taoïstes et prétendirent que c'était la voie du salut. Ils formèrent également des élèves pour en faire des moines. Après les guerres sino-birmanes, ces moines établirent un système de cinq districts du Bouddha parmi les Lahu et certains villages Wa de l'ouest du Mékong, jusqu'à ce que ce système soit détruit par le gouvernement des Qing dans les années 1880. Ces moines devinrent des leaders des Luohei/Lahu dans des mouvements millénaristes et de nombreux immigrants Han participèrent à ces mouvements pour devenir des Lahu ou des Wa. Ces moines tinrent des rôles critiques comme activistes sociaux dans la reconstruction culturelle lahu. En tant que pouvoir actif, leur action humaine fut profondément liée à des sociétés secrètes et ils instituèrent des centres politiques régionaux ainsi qu'un mécanisme de réseau pour des populations indigènes fluctuantes. À l'évidence, des sociétés secrètes donnèrent forme à un cadre historique pour la politique locale et les flux économiques à la frontière birmano-yunnanaise et devinrent un mécanisme transfrontalier pour la vie quotidienne après l'établissement de frontières entre le Yunnan, la Birmanie et la Thaïlande. Il s'agissait de fait d'un réseau dynamique lié aux mines d'argent et de cuivre, aux guerres sino-birmanes, ainsi qu'à un millénarisme anti-Qing. Les populations locales pouvaient également utiliser cet espace frontalier pour négocier avec les divers États avant l'établissement du colonialisme européen.

**Keywords:** Yunnan-Burma frontier – secret society – the Lahu – cross-border – millenarianism.

**Mots-clés:** Frontière birmano-yunnanaise – société secrète – Lahu – transfrontalier – millénarisme.