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In 1911, the revolution led by Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) and his associates in the Revolutionary Alliance that overthrew the Manchu Qing dynasty was a landmark event in the history of Asia. It not only founded the first republic in Asia, but also ended the imperial rule of the country in the past two millennia. In other words, the 1911 Revolution marked the transition of empire to nation-state for China. While this change was consistent with worldwide historical developments, this was by no means an easy and smooth process for the Chinese. From the early 17th century, nation-state building began in Western Europe and gradually became a main trend of history around the world in the subsequent centuries. One of the major differences between empire and nation-state was shown in its policy toward outside regions. From ancient period, Chinese rulers entertained the notion of “All under Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) in describing its imperial realm. Some scholars have considered such view as the “boundless world” (*wubian tianxia* 無邊天下). By contrast, a nation-state is built on a clearly defined border, or with the “limited boundary” (*youxian jiangjie* 有限疆界).¹ From another perspective, an empire usually consisted of innerland and frontier, or center-periphery regions, whereas a nation-state hopes to control, indiscriminately, all regions within its territory. The changing meaning of the term *Zhongguo* 中國 underscored the transition of China from an empire to a nation-state in the early twentieth century. Over the long imperial period, *Zhongguo* usually referred to the core area under the reigning dynasty. As such, it was rendered as the “Middle Kingdom.” But in the process of nation-building, *Zhongguo* began to be used, by historians in particular, to describe China as a modern state.²

But the imperial legacy remained, particularly with respect to modern China's territorial control. The Republic of China of 1911 and the subsequent People's Republic of China founded in 1949 both inherited the Qing empire's territory, consisting such frontier regions as Manchuria in the northeast, (Inner) Mongolia in the northwest, and Tibet in the southwest. In this issue of *Chinese Studies in History*, we present the studies of frontier regions in South China, including today's Tibetan Buddhist regions in Sichuan, mountainous areas in Yunnan, and southeast coastal regions in Fujian, during the late imperial periods. Our purpose is to showcase how the Ming and Qing dynasties envisioned their territories, designed their frontier policies, and implemented them for exercising control.

The field of frontier studies was dominated by a center-periphery discourse for a long time. That is, the idea of “All under Heaven” was a dominating concept for rulers in China, regardless their ethnicity, to entertain an all-encompassing notion of their world. Meanwhile, most rulers also had a full recognition that their imperial realm was composed of various zones, differentiated by levels of cultural development and characteristics of ethnicity. In early imperial China, for example, the policymakers had already developed the “five zone” concept in perceiving their territorial and demographic composition. For each zone, they designed different policies to best exercise control, ranging, as it were, from “free reign” to “acculturation” and “pacification.” In building modern China, needless to say, the Chinese government developed markedly different ruling policies toward frontier regions. But after founding of the People's Republic of China in

1949, communist leaders also established several “autonomous districts” in outside regions like Xinjiang, Tibet, and Guangxi, which remain in place today. Thus, there has been a level of historical continuity with respect to frontier policies. At the same time, we also recognize that in more recent years, Chinese leaders have made significant changes to their ruling methods of these aforementioned regions. All this, we hope, attests to the importance of the study included in this issue.

This issue is edited also because though the outward expansion through military and economic vehicles from China’s political centers was, by any measure, the basic pattern that dynasties in Chinese history took shape, the historiography on such processes has experienced dramatic change over the past decades. The idea of overwhelming imperial extension that encompasses political annexation, cultural assimilation, and economic colonization has been constantly challenged. Instead, more attention is cast on the so-called frontier dwellers who were previously deemed voiceless and had no agency in the face of imperial imposition. Such a shift is at first made possible by the discovery of local materials in the so-called frontier regions, and second, is a reflection of new scholarly interest that calls for revisiting the nature of empires with marginalized experiences. The four articles in this special issue together present how this new trend is played out in Chinese academia.

At the risk of oversimplification, we may perhaps argue that there have occurred two “turns” in the historiography of Chinese frontier history that affected the study as a whole in recent years: the “empire turn” and the “local turn.” The “empire turn” reconsiders “frontier” not as clearly demarcated border that separates nation-states, but the utmost reach of imperial expansion. In other words, “frontier” is not a linear boundary that defines the realm of state control, but rather an open sphere of encounter, contestation, and test point of the limit of imperial power.³ In this way, studies on the frontiers following the “empire turn” are usually situated in the macro frameworks of transnational geopolitics or structural comparison between multiple polities. By contrast, the “local turn” usually examines frontier history at the micro level. By paying attention to specific locales or communities, scholars tend to highlight on-the-ground agency and grassroots improvisation. As such, the local turn enables scholars to reconsider the center-periphery dichotomy. Indigenous voices from the frontier may reveal how the so-called peripheries conceived themselves and their domains as the *center* lying amid multiple outsiders from afar. Therefore, the history of frontiers should be investigated on their own terms. The notion of “center-periphery,” as a conceptual tool, tends to marginalize the frontier region’s role in state formation. While the interaction between the metropole and the frontier is not always precipitated by the former, it is often the frontier that triggers changes and bends the state apparatus to its own will.

The rise and development of two schools reflect and influenced the aforementioned two turns in Chinese frontier history: the New Qing History school (新清史) and the Southern China school (華南學派). One must note that these are not self-appellations, but rather names given by others. Although dissents existed within both schools, scholars tend to agree on certain key points or address common questions in similar ways. The New Qing History scholars question the hegemony of Chinese materials and classic Chinese historiography. On the contrary, they rely on non-Chinese sources to reconsider the structure of Qing imperial repertoire and revisit “China” as an analytical category. Highlighting the diversity and variety within the empire, the New Qing History scholars take frontier regions as the manifestation of the Qing empire’s heterogenous imperial nature. But is the Qing unique in this regard? As indicated in Lian Ruizhi and Zhao Shiyu’s articles, the Ming empire was quite flexible as well in creating an administrative structure that allows semiautonomous secular regimes and religious communities for indigenous practices. In that case, do we see any fundamental difference between the Ming and Qing empires’ multiethnic and hierarchical imperial order? Another contribution made by the authors of this special issue is to challenge the hegemony of ethnicity. As one significant keyword in early-stage New Qing History scholarship, ethnic identification was given extensive attention to check the domination of the Sinicization discourse. However,

as Chen Boyi and Hu Xiaobai point out, ethnicity was not always the parameter of the Qing empire's frontier policy. Chen claims that approaches to restructure grassroots communities in China proper may not differ much from those in non-Han regions; religion, as indicated in Hu's work, oftentimes transcended ethnic and linguistic boundaries and functioned as a significant variable that formed and reformed frontier landscape. The four articles on Ming–Qing China's southern frontier demonstrate great potential to dialog with the New Qing History scholarship that so far has shed more light on the empire's Inner Asian frontiers.

Compared with the New Qing History school, the Southern China school is somewhat more diverse with respect to the academic background of the first generation of scholars who established the school. From the 1980s on, several anthropologists, religion scholars, and historians from European, North American, Hong Kong, and Taiwan research institutes started to cooperate with Chinese scholars and adopted historical-anthropological approaches to study the local societies of Guangdong and Fujian. Addressing various scholarly questions notwithstanding, one of Southern China school scholars' keen interests is the organizational structure and operating mechanism of Chinese grassroots societies. Greatly influenced by anthropological theories, Southern China scholarship highly values bottom-up perspective and dedicates to reveal the common people's agency in negotiating with, resisting, or even influencing the state apparatus. The classic Southern China scholarship pays attention to the role lineages played in grassroots society and their economic and cultural functions, the exchange between local ritual traditions and official state orthodoxy, and the various ways local agents adopted for social integration and regulatory arbitrage. In this issue, Chen Boyi's article could be deemed standard southern China research. By using local materials such as genealogies and stele inscriptions, Chen vividly portrays how the Han communities in southern Fujian amended the way that state policies of coastal evacuation were implemented during a turbulent dynastic transitional period. Lian Ruizhi and Hu Xiaobai's work, in contrast, shed light on non-Han regions in southwest China, where grassroots social structures were considerably different from that of southern China. Both Lian and Hu examine the agency of indigenous non-Han leaders through the lens of rulership-making. While Lian investigates the ways in which indigenous Buddhism was redefined in western Yunnan in the wake of the penetration of Ming imperial power, Hu scrutinizes how figureheads in southern Sichuan took advantage of Tibetan Buddhism for local interest. In both cases, rulers of non-Han regimes in southwest China contingently calibrate their knowledge of geopolitics and shifted between various sources of legitimacy. Unlike the other three articles that focus on specific locales, Zhao Shiyu revisited multiple frontiers from the "state" standpoint. Adopting a bird's-eye perspective, Zhao seeks to unfold common pattern between Ming China's multiple frontiers due to similar social changes and political reforms. While the Southern China school tends to study individual region, Zhao's comparative framework is significant in pointing out the broader historical context.

The first article is written by Zhao Shiyu, Professor of History at Peking University. Having maintained a close relationship with the Southern China scholars and conducted extensive regional studies in recent years, Zhao's piece takes a different approach. It employs a top-down perspective and centers on the *state*. Zhao argues that during the transitional period of the Ming dynasty Longqing (隆慶 1567–1572) and Wanli (萬曆 1573–1620) reigns, two factors culminated in simultaneous crisis and similar solutions in the empire's southern, southwest, and western frontiers. From the mid-16th century, the booming population in China proper led to massive migration into the southern frontier regions, resulting in tension between the indigenes and newcomers and clash over land, trade, and natural resources. At court, powerful and hegemonic ministers such as Gao Gong (高拱, 1513–1578) and Zhang Juzheng (張居正, 1525–1582) developed consistent ideas to cope with frontier crises, leading to similar ways of pacifying turmoil in multiple southern frontiers. Restating the importance of the *state*, Zhao proposes a holistic view to understand the late Ming metropole-frontier interactions and focus on the shared characters and interconnectivity between several seemingly separated frontier regions.

The second article is written by Lian Ruizhi, a professor at National Chiao Tung University in Taiwan. Unlike Zhao's piece that focuses on how an entire round of frontier reform was initiated in the mid- to late 16th century, Lian's article sheds light on the recipient end of the Ming's Sinicization attempt in the early 16th century. Examining the households of three indigenous rulers in western Yunnan, Lian studies how Confucian cultural symbols penetrated into the Ming empire's southwest frontier, and how the locals redrew cultural and religious landscape in response. In southwest China, Buddhism had been the primary source of rulership legitimacy for centuries. However, new space was created for Confucian ideology when the Ming intended to bring the frontier region into the imperial orbit through cultural vehicles. On one hand, local regime leaders began to build ancestral halls, compile genealogies, and practice Confucian worship rituals to showcase their embrace of Ming state orthodoxy. On the other hand, they creatively incorporated the imposed cultural values into the indigenous cosmology so as to justify their local governance with dual legitimacy.

The importance of Buddhism for local society and indigenous rulership is also shown in Hu Xiaobai's work. As a PhD candidate of history at the University of Pennsylvania, Hu examines how the leaders of Muli (木里), a small regime in present-day southern Sichuan, wielded Tibetan Buddhism as a political tool to interact with exogenous powers and consolidate local authority. Facing the regional competition between multiple Tibetan Buddhist schools, different Mongol clans, the Lijiang Naxi kingdom, Wu Sangui's Yunnan regime and the Ming and Qing dynasties in the late 17th century Sino-Tibetan borderland, Muli leaders played an important role in shaping regional power dynamics. On one hand, they relied on the Tibetan Buddhist Geluk school to break from the Naxi kingdom's colonization and eliminate regional secular and religious rivals; on the other hand, the Muli leaders complied overtly but violated covertly when interacting with the Lhasa government to retain a certain degree of local agency. Using Tibetan materials to reconstruct the ways in which an indigenous notion of rulership took shape, Hu's work reiterates the necessity to understand livelihood, identity and epistemology of the frontier society on their own terms.

Last, but not least, is the article Chen Boyi, a PhD candidate in history at Washington University in St. Louis. Directing attention to *Qianhai* (遷海), an early Qing imperial order that aimed at evacuating the coast in order to eliminate anti-Qing activities, Chen examines the ramification of one specific policy and how the locals seize this opportunity for social reintegration. Chen argues that the social transformation in the Zhangpu (漳浦) County during the Ming-Qing transition demonstrates how the imperial orders were tailored to meet on-the-ground reality. Relying on the details preserved in local materials such as genealogies and stele inscriptions, Chen portrayed a process of grassroots society restructure after dynastic transition. Extensively stirring preexisting power structure, the early Qing government resorted to *Qianhai* to strengthen their control over frontier society and implemented household registers to recategorize imperial subjects. However, such purposes were not likely to be achieved without the cooperation from various local communities, whose intention, not surprisingly, was to take advantage of imperial policies to maximize local interest.

Notes

1. See, for example, Feng Jianming, "Cong 'wubian tianxia' dao 'youxian jiangjie': jindai Zhongguo jiangyu yanbian yu bianjiang zhishi tixi shengcheng" (From "boundless world" to "limited boundary": the origin and development of the knowledge system about China's borderlands), *Beifang minzu daxue xuebao* (Journal of North Minzu University), 6 (2018).
2. See Q. Edward Wang, *Inventing China through History: the May Fourth Approach to Historiography* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).
3. On frontiers in the framework of empire studies, see Peter Perdue, "Empires and Frontiers in Continental Eurasia," in Wolfgang Reinhard ed., *Empires and Encounters* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), 55–221.