

Territoriality and fragmented political control on the Gansu-Tibetan frontier: a local history of Chone and Thewu, 1880–1940

Wim van Spengen

If territoriality is the persistent attachment to a specific territory and *fragmentation* stands for the tendency of political power to break up under a variety of pressures, the subject matter of this proposed history of the Chone and Thewu frontier lands may well have been sufficiently indicated. A frontier region, by definition, is a marchland, a border area in which effective territorial control by a central authority is limited. On the southern Gansu-Tibetan border the central authority of both China and the central Tibetan polity was at least tenuous for the period under discussion (1880–1940), and the local principality of Chone and its monastic counterpart may be said to have wielded little effective political power in its more outlying areas too. In particular the Thewu in their secluded river valleys beyond the Min Shan escaped princely control and were virtually a law unto themselves. But there was little law to speak of, and infighting between clans and villages were the order of the day.

Although the history of northeastern Tibet, mainly on the basis of Tibetan and Chinese sources, is increasingly in the process of being unraveled, I propose here to highlight the contribution the older European travel literature (both published and unpublished) can make to this attempt at historical interpretation. After all, travelers, missionaries, and political agents had a chance to see and hear things, which, when put in their proper context, provide us with an additional perspective on the frontier history under review. The southern Gansu-Tibetan border region in particular deserves further elaboration, as the local history of Chone and Thewu is less well known than the historical vicissitudes of the neighbouring monastic centres of Kumbum and Labrang.

Political power in the Chone princely territory, or rather the lack of it, made for very unsettled frontier conditions for the greater part of the period, and the main thrust of this contribution is to show how interlocking spheres of political power at different scale levels, interacted to produce a unique historical situation. First of all, there were the Thewu, the inhabitants of the Tao, but more so the deeply eroded Peishui river valley. By the end of the 19th century historical circumstances had produced an impoverished and utterly unruly population, more or less kept in check by the prince of Chone. Conspicuous local Thewu robbery and occasionally wholesale Thewu raids plagued Chone well into the 1920s. Secondly, there was the Tibetan prince of Chone who had to fight Chinese political encroachment on his territory, intermittently giving way to periods of political vacuum, as for instance in the years after the Chinese Revolution of 1911. These periods of lesser central Chinese control, however, brought the danger of roaming warlords like the White Wolf who terrorized the Tao river valley in May 1914. Thirdly, there were the Christian

missionaries who from about 1895 had settled in the upper Tao valley near Taochou and later Chone, and from there tried to establish a foothold in the trans – Min Shan Thewu strongholds. Fourthly, there were the Mohammedan Chinese of the neighbouring districts of Taochow, Minchow, and Hochow, who staged two bloody rebellions against the Chinese, the reverberations of which were felt all along the Gansu-Tibetan border. Finally there was the fluctuating but persisting, and over time increasing, Chinese political pressure, at first through the prince of Chone, but later more directly through the viceroy of Gansu at Lanchow. Ultimately, the prince of Chone was removed from power in the 1930s.

A formerly *de facto* Tibetan territory, through a period of fragmented political control, itself the product of a complex interlocking set of power relations at different scale levels in a transitional frontier area, had slowly ended up in Chinese hands. It is the stated purpose of this paper to trace more in detail the rich local history of Chone and Thewu, which may finally contribute to a better understanding of the structural dynamics of Sino-Tibetan frontier history at large.