

A Study on the Sovereign Jurisdiction Mechanism of Xizang in the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract: This paper systematically combs through the historical archives related to Tibet during the Qing Dynasty to examine the Qing Dynasty's mechanisms of sovereignty over Xizang and their evolution. The study reveals that the Qing Dynasty formed a triangular framework centered on imperial authority, consisting of "central government—provinces—tribal territories", which effectively achieved long-term and stable governance over Xizang. The tributary authority of Xizang underwent a historical evolution from the Khutans' court to the Kashag office and the Prince of the Commandery system, and then to the authority of the Amban in Tibet. Each iteration was the result of structural changes in the territorial framework. Through an in-depth analysis of the relationship between imperial authority and the Gelug Sect, this paper demonstrates that Xizang during the Qing Dynasty consistently maintained a political form of separation between religion and state rather than integration: the pure spirit of imperial authority contained no elements of the Gelug Sect's theocratic nature, and the tributary authority was independent of the Gelug Sect's religious power. This research clarifies the traditional perception of "Xizang's integration of religion and state", reveals the institutional foundation of Xizang's sovereignty during the Qing Dynasty, and holds significant academic and practical value for understanding the historical relationship between the central government and the Tibetan region.

Keywords: Qing Dynasty Xizang; Sovereignty jurisdiction; Land border pattern; Frontier governance; Separation of church and state

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1. Introduction

Xizang has been an inseparable part of China's territory since ancient times, a historical fact based on the institutional foundation of the central government's effective jurisdiction over Xizang. The Qing Dynasty, as an important historical period in China's traditional dynastic governance of Xizang, formed a complete mechanism of sovereign jurisdiction. However, there are still divergent views in academia regarding the internal logic and operational mechanisms of this mechanism. For a long time, "the unity of religion and state in Xizang" has been widely used as a conventional expression. Scholars such as Dongga Losang Chilie, inspired by Engels' discourse

on the unity of religion and state in Prussia, argued that the Dalai Lama embodied both secular kingship and religious leadership. However, this assertion has theoretical presuppositions: Xizang was not a sovereign state, and the Dalai Lama was not the ruler of a nation. Simply applying the analytical framework of sovereign states' religious-political relations may lead to misinterpretations of historical truths. This paper systematically combs through archival materials such as the "Compilation of Historical Archives on the Relationship Between Tibet and the Central Government Since the Yuan Dynasty" and proposes an analytical framework of "land boundary patterns" to address the following core questions: How did the Qing central government achieve effective jurisdiction over Xizang? How did the territorial governance of Xizang evolve? What form did the religious-political relationship in Xizang ultimately take? The paper reveals the triangular structure and interaction mechanisms of central governance, provincial governance, and territorial governance, outlining the evolution of territorial governance from the Khutans' court to the authority of the Amban in Tibet. By examining the relationship between imperial power and the theocratic authority of the Gelug Sect, it demonstrates the basic form of the separation of religion and state in Xizang during the Qing Dynasty, which holds significant academic and practical value for understanding the institutional essence of the relationship between the central government and the Tibetan region in history.

2. The effective jurisdiction of traditional China over frontier politics

2.1. The land border pattern is a triangular structure of the central government, provinces, and frontier regions

The emperor exercised central governance authority to oversee frontier affairs. Imperial power is sovereignty, and sovereignty gives rise to governance authority. Traditional China's governance authority includes central governance, provincial governance, frontier governance, and military governance, which originate from imperial power yet differ from it. In the decision-making or governance of frontier affairs, multiple central institutions often collaborate (see **Table 1**): the Cabinet and the Board of Colonial Affairs can coordinate with each other, both working with the Deliberative Council of Princes and Ministers, while the Deliberative Council of Princes and Ministers also cooperates with the Six Ministries and the Board of Colonial Affairs. The Six Ministries and the Board of Colonial Affairs, or the Grand Council, further coordinate with each other, and the Board of Colonial Affairs or the Grand Council can also collaborate with the Cabinet. This demonstrates that the Deliberative Council of Princes and Ministers, the Cabinet, the Grand Council, the Six Ministries, the Board of Colonial Affairs, and the Censorate are always closely interconnected through internal court procedures. Therefore, in traditional China, even though institutions like the Board of Colonial Affairs have exclusive jurisdiction over frontier affairs, the emperor still exercises overall control over these affairs through central governance authority. However, the central government and the frontier regions are not entirely separate entities. Key links between the central government and the frontier regions include Prince Yunli, He Shou, who managed Xizang affairs through the Board of Colonial Affairs, E Lai, who was promoted from a Board of Colonial Affairs director to a Cabinet scholar and Vice Minister of Rites, Zong Qi, a member of the imperial clan and deputy commander, Ban Di, a Cabinet scholar, Cha Lang'a, who was promoted from the Left Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate to Minister of Personnel, as well as Chaham Lama, Ban Di Dalama, Darghan Lama, Xilabuge Long, and Dajilharangtu^[1].

The emperor assisted the central government in governing frontier affairs by delegating provincial administrative powers. Frontier regions were not subordinate to any specific province but existed as a tier of local administration parallel to provinces within the state; thus, provincial officials could not directly manage frontier

affairs. However, the central government's planning for Xizang affairs required the collaboration of officials from neighboring Sichuan, Yunnan, and Shaanxi provinces, with the three provinces able to operate independently, jointly, or in pairs (see **Table 2**)^[2]. Although provincial finances incurred significant expenditures on frontier regions, their strategic importance was crucial for safeguarding provincial and even traditional China's sovereignty. For instance, in the second year of Yongzheng's reign, Nian Gengyao's memorial on the thirteen measures for pacifying Lobzang Danjin emphasized that "Mongols and Western Tibetans were all registered households, while Shaanxi, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces enjoyed peace for generations, ensuring the world's prosperity." Similarly, in the 32nd year of Guangxu's reign, the Resident Minister in Tibet knelt and petitioned: "The land of Xizang borders Yunnan to the south, Gansu to the north, and Sichuan to the east. Should Xizang fall, Gansu, Yunnan, and Sichuan would be in peril, along with the Inner and Outer Mongols and the Yangtze River region"^[3]. This demonstrates that frontier regions held equal strategic importance to provinces in safeguarding traditional China's sovereignty.

The emperor placed the central, provincial, and frontier governance powers within the land border framework to administer the frontier regions. In the early Qing Dynasty, the emperor generally directly oversaw frontier affairs centered on the Khutanshukh's court by granting them frontier governance powers, while also exercising direct imperial control over other frontier matters. As the Qing Dynasty's unification stabilized, the importance of provinces in the emperor's management of frontier affairs became increasingly evident, and frontier governance powers underwent continuous evolution. A land border framework gradually took shape within traditional China, where central governance led local affairs, frontier governance managed the frontier regions independently, and provincial governance assisted in managing the frontier regions. Through this stable triangular structure, the emperor achieved long-term, stable, and effective jurisdiction over frontier affairs^[4]. The system in which the emperor placed central, provincial, and frontier governance powers within the land border framework to administer the frontier regions is called the frontier system. Once established, the frontier system persisted throughout the Qing Dynasty (see **Table 3**). The central institutions or provinces handling specific frontier affairs varied across different matters, with different emphases in different periods, and each had its own developmental trends.

Table 1. Central authority over regional affairs

Collaborative central agency	Time	Archive number
The Cabinet and the Board of Colonial Affairs	1638	516
The Cabinet and the Board of Colonial Affairs	34th year of Kangxi	545
The Cabinet, the Board of Colonial Affairs, and the Council of State Ministers	1639	519
The Cabinet, the Board of Colonial Affairs, and the Council of State Ministers	29th year of Kangxi	537
The Cabinet, the Board of Colonial Affairs, and the Council of State Ministers	48th year of Kangxi	570
The Cabinet, the Board of Colonial Affairs, and the Council of State Ministers	Third year of Yongzheng	620, 622, 626
The Bureau of Colonial Affairs and the Six Ministries	Shunzhi 9	460
The Bureau of Colonial Affairs and the Six Ministries	Shunzhi 10	478
The Bureau of Colonial Affairs and the Six Ministries	Yongzheng 9	674
The Cabinet, the Board of Colonial Affairs, and the Six Ministries	Qianlong 3	688
The Office of Military Affairs and the Six Ministries	11th year of Yongzheng	704
The Cabinet, the Military Affairs Office, and the Six Ministries	12th year of Qianlong	728
Ministers of the Court, the Six Ministries, and the Censorate	Yongzheng 5	640

Source: Historical materials. Editor: Hui Bian, edited by Dorje Tseden

Table 2. Provincial authorities assisted the central government in administering regional affairs

Provinces assisting the central government	Time	Archive number
Sichuan, Yunnan, Shaanxi	4th year of Yongzheng	626
Sichuan, Yunnan, Shaanxi	Yongzheng 5	638
Sichuan, Yunnan, Shaanxi	6th year of Yongzheng	645
Sichuan, Yunnan	6th year of Yongzheng	641
Sichuan, Shaanxi	Yongzheng 9	674
Shaanxi Province	6th year of Yongzheng	656
Yunnan	Qianlong 6	718
Sichuan	18th year of Qianlong	772

Source: Historical materials. Editor: Hui Bian, edited by Dorje Tseden

Table 3. Traditional China gradually formed a land border pattern

Pattern	The title of an emperor's reign	Archive number
Office of Grand Council of State 	40th year of Qianlong	789
Tibetan Commander-in-Chief, Governor of Sichuan		
Military Affairs Office, Hanlin Academy 	41st year of Qianlong	789
The general stationed in Chengdu		
Office of Grand Council of State 	21st year of Jiaqing	952 ~ 957
Tibetan Minister and Governor of Sichuan		
Military Affairs Office, Cabinet 	20th year of Daoguang	985 ~ 994
Tibetan Minister and Governor of Sichuan		
Office of Grand Council of State 	5th year of Xianfeng	1063
Ambassador to Tibet and General of Chengdu		
Council of State Ministers, Military Affairs Office 	Tongzhi 1	1092
Tibetan Minister and Governor of Sichuan		
Lianfan Yuan, Duzhachuan 	4th year of Tongzhi	1104
Tibetan Minister and Governor of Sichuan		
Office of Grand Council of State 	Guangxu 5	1115
Tibetan Minister and Governor of Sichuan		

Source: Drogpa Tseden, compiled: Compilation

2.2. The evolution of territorial governance in the land border pattern

The Kashag Office was a product of the territorial structure of the land frontier. After Gushi Khan submitted to the Qing Dynasty, the emperor granted the Khoshut Khan court the legitimate authority to govern Xizang, while the authority of the Kashag Office was established by the emperor upon the suggestion of provincial officials and through central deliberation. The establishment of the Kashag Office was primarily based on the military authority of the Qing court. After the Lhakhang Khan was killed by Tsewang Rabtan, the throne remained vacant. When General Yun De of the Pacification Campaign entered Xining, “the local chieftain Albu Ba, who had been vacant, first submitted, advancing with the troops to capture Tibet; the local chieftain Kangji Nai, who was at odds with the Dzungar, intercepted the Dzungar’s people and cut off their retreat; the chieftain Longbu Nai personally submitted.” The court therefore approved Yun De’s request, granting “Chieftain Albu Ba and Chieftain Kangji Ding both the title of Beizi; Chieftain Longbu Nai was granted the title of Fuguo Gong”^[5]. That year, “(in Tibet) the ‘Garan’ was first established, with Kangji Ding Suonan Jiabu (bestowed the name Daiqing Batu) as the chief Garan, Albu Ba as the principal Garan, and Longbu Nai and Zhar Ding as deputy Garen”, who managed “affairs of the front Tibet”^[6]. Suonan Duoji was appointed by the emperor as the Taiji “to guard the rear Tibet”, and “to manage state affairs on behalf of Beizi Kangji Nai”, becoming one of the “Five Garen”^[7-8]. Soon after, “Daiqing Batu Suonan Jiabu (Kangji Nai), Apai Ba (Albu Ba), Gonglong Ba (Longbu Ding), Suonan Duoji (Suonan Duoji), and Jia Re Wa Luo Zhu Jiebu (Zhar Ding) established a council of ministers to jointly manage state affairs”, located in “the Great Prayer Hall”^[9]. This shows that the transition from the Khoshut Khan court to the Kashag Office was initiated by the military authority of the Qing court, and the Qing Dynasty was not “invading” Xizang.

The authority of the Kashag Office was established through the central administration and provincial coordination of Xizang affairs within the land border framework. In the third year of the Yongzheng reign, the Sichuan-Shaanxi Viceroy Yue Zhongqi submitted a memorial: “Please appoint Kangjidin as the chief administrator and Albuba as the assistant (for Xizang affairs), and issue an imperial edict”, which was followed by the Yongzheng edict: “The princes Kangjidin, Albuba, Gonglongbunai, Zhasatou, and Poluonai, along with Zhading, originally held no Kashag rank. However, due to their outstanding service and elevated status, they were specially appointed as Kangjidin as the chief administrator and Albuba as the assistant, to oversee Tibetan affairs”^[10-11]. This demonstrates that the succession of territorial governance was a product of the land border framework. The Kashag Office was essentially a subordinate institution of the Qing court: in the fourth year of the Yongzheng reign, the edict to the Dalai Lama stated, “Kangjidin and others handle Tibetan affairs, no different from the officials I have appointed”, and in the 16th year of the Qianlong reign, the second article of the “Xizang Thirteen Articles” read, “The Kashag Office originally had its own administrative office”, indicating that the territorial governance succession triggered by the land border framework remained part of the land border structure^[12].

The establishment of the Kashag Office indicated that Xizang politics transcended the scope of tribal rule. In Zhou Ying’s design of the decentralization of the Kashag Office, the five Kashag members “each had local responsibilities. During the cold winter and spring when the grass withered, they all assisted in handling Kashag affairs in Xizang; in the summer and autumn when the grass was lush, they took turns to patrol and prevent floods”^[13]. Kangjiding of the Later Tibet managed the Later Tibet, Poloding of the Later Tibet managed Ngari, Alubaba of Gongbu managed Gongbu, Tabu, and Barkam, Zhanainai of Lhasa managed the seventy-nine clan regions where Yushu and Nakeshu were located, and Longbuding of Lhasa managed the area from Lhasa to Hara Usu. In the Kashag Office, the officials managing Xizang did not have the political status of tribal leaders, but only a clear division between chief and assistant, which was obviously different from tribal rule; moreover, the power

struggle within the Kashag Office was manifested in the form of officials forming factions rather than territorial disputes among tribes: In the fifth year of Yongzheng, Deputy Commander Ezi of the imperial clan reported: “I went to Xizang to examine the situation... (Alubaba, Sonam Daldar, and Longbuding) formed a single faction...”^[14]. Therefore, the Kashag Office, which emerged from the territorial framework, indicated that the administrative nature of Xizang had shifted from tribal aggregation to a fiefdom.

The Prince of Xizang system was a structural product of the land frontier pattern. In the fifth year of Yongzheng, the internal factional conflicts among the Galdan erupted. Kang Jiding and Beizi Albubu, Gonglong Buna, Zhalaitsiji, and others gathered at the Sanjie Platform in the office beside the Juewofu Hall of the Jokhang Temple, where Kang Jiding was killed by Albubu and others^[15]. This office was likely the address of the Galdan’s official residence, hence “after Polodin, all Galdans no longer went to the Galdan’s official residence but handled affairs in their private homes”^[16]. In the sixth year of Yongzheng, the Qing Dynasty authorized Polodin to administer the front and rear Tibet regions and conferred upon him the title of Beizi; in the ninth year of Yongzheng, he was further promoted to Beile and entrusted with overseeing all affairs in Xizang^[17]; in the fourth year of Qianlong, Polodin was elevated to the rank of Prince of Xizang and awarded the seal of “Commander-in-Chief of the Affairs of the Tibetan and other regions”^[18-19]. In the twelfth year of Qianlong, the Qing Dynasty decreed that the title of Prince of Xizang could be inherited by Zhurmet Namzhar. It is evident that the Prince of Xizang system remained under the land frontier pattern of the Qing central government’s control over frontier affairs.

The authority of the Amban in Tibet was a product of the territorial structure of the land. In December of the fourth year of Yongzheng’s reign, Yongzheng discussed with the Viceroy of Sichuan and Shaanxi, Yue Zhongqi, the feasibility of establishing an Amban in Tibet. After deliberation in the imperial court, Yongzheng decided to appoint an Amban and informed Yue Zhongqi, “The court will soon appoint two officials from the capital to send one military officer from Shaanxi to accompany you to Tibet for supervision and report. I approve this”^[20]. This shows that the Qing court’s decision to establish an Amban in Xizang was the result of both the Sichuan Viceroy’s suggestion and the central court’s deliberation. In the sixteenth year of Qianlong’s reign (1751), the imperial envoy Zhao Hui, the Sichuan Viceroy Tsing, and the Deputy Commander of Tibet Bandi, following imperial orders, used the residence of Prince Zhuermote Namzhar of Xizang as the Amban’s office. Later, the emperor approved the “Thirteen Posterior Arrangements for Xizang” submitted by the imperial envoy Zhao Hui, the Sichuan Viceroy Tsing, the Amban Bandi, and Namzhar, and officially strengthened the Amban’s authority by having him inform all Tibet^[21]. “All major local affairs and urgent postal matters must be reported to the Dalai Lama and the Amban for approval and execution”, marking the transformation of the Kashag office into a subordinate institution of the Dalai Lama and the Amban, known as the Kashag government^[22]. In the 57th year of Qianlong (1792), after defeating the harassment of the Gurkhas against Xizang, the emperor ordered the Grand Council ministers to convey instructions to General Fukan’an, Sichuan Governor Sun Shiyi, and the resident minister in Tibet Hui Ling and Helin to deliberate on the post-war arrangements. This shows that the “Imperial Decree on the Twenty-Nine Articles of Post-War Arrangements in Tibet”, which stipulated that “all administrative powers would be managed by the resident minister in Tibet”, was also a product of the territorial structure of the land frontier. Moreover, this political program further strengthened the governance authority of the resident minister in Tibet. The establishment and development of the governance authority of the resident minister in Tibet gradually perfected the bureaucratic system of Xizang.

3. The political and religious form of Xizang

3.1. The political and educational form of Xizang is constrained by the state system

The political and religious form of Tibet still has room for discussion. “Xizang’s political and religious unity” was clearly proposed by Dongga Losang Chilie in his work “On Xizang’s Political and Religious Unity System.” Inspired by Engels’ article “The Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV”, he believed that Xizang during the Qing Dynasty was a system of political and religious unity: “What is meant by political and religious unity is that the secular king and the religious leader are held by one person. Before this, there was a stage of political and religious separation. This discussion inspires the researchers to further understand the emergence of Xizang’s political and religious unity system, indicating that in Xizang, there was also a stage where the secular king and the religious leader existed separately, before developing into a system of political and religious unity where the king and the religious leader are combined into one person”^[23]. Engels’ judgment on Prussia is correct, but Xizang is not a sovereign state, and the Dalai Lama is not the ruler of a country. The political and religious forms of Tibet have always been separate. Therefore, the “democratic reform” of “political and religious unity” by the Dalai clique is meaningless. The fundamental reform lies in the new China’s democratic reforms in all aspects of Xizang.

The criterion for judging the political-educational form of Xizang is “whether the pure spirit of imperial authority contains the connotation of the Gelug sect.” Engels said: “In Protestant countries, the king is the summus episcopus (archbishop), who combines the highest powers of the church and the state in one person; the ultimate purpose of this form of state is what Hegel called the union of church and state... Before becoming the summus episcopus (archbishop), the monarch is a monarch, and after becoming the summus episcopus (archbishop), he remains primarily a monarch, without being granted any ecclesiastical office. On the other hand: now the monarch has gathered all powers (earthly and heavenly) in his own person, and this earthly God marks the pinnacle of the religious state”^[24]. When Engels judged the political-educational form of Prussia, he actually explored the relationship between the supreme religious authority and the monarch, and further, the relationship between the highest religious power of the state and the primary political power of the state. This method can also be applied at the local level, that is, to compare the intrinsic connection between the highest religious power of the locality and the primary political power of the locality. The highest religious power of the Tibetan region is the Gelug sect, while the primary political power of the locality is imperial authority. According to the syllogism, the major premise is “in the imperial system, the emperor is the first person in any place under his rule”, the minor premise is “Xizang sovereignty belongs to traditional China, and the highest system of Tibet is the imperial system”, and the conclusion is “the emperor is the first person of Xizang”, hence the primary political power of the Tibetan region is imperial authority. Religion interprets the emperor as the reincarnation of Manjushri Bodhisattva, so there is undoubtedly imperial content in the theocratic nature of the Gelug Sect. However, the unity of religion and state is the mutual integration of politics and religion. It is clearly biased to claim that Xizang is a case of the unity of religion and state merely because the Gelug Sect unilaterally combines with imperial power. The criteria for judging the political and religious form of Tibet should also consider whether “the pure spirit of imperial power contains the theocratic connotation of the Gelug Sect.” If the pure spirit of imperial power combines with the theocratic nature of the Gelug Sect, the political form of Xizang is the unity of religion and state; otherwise, it is not.

3.2. In the Qing Dynasty, Xizang always separated politics from religion

The Qing imperial authority’s spiritual purity excluded the theocratic elements of the Gelug Sect. In 1652 (the

ninth year of Shunzhi's reign), Emperor Shunzhi declared: "If I respect the lamas through ritual observance without joining their religion, what harm could that cause?"^[25]. This demonstrates that the Qing court's rejection of Gelug Sect affiliation was a founding principle established during the dynasty's establishment. The Fifth Dalai Lama referred to Emperor Kangxi as "His Majesty the Manjushri Emperor, the Sovereign of Heaven and Earth who embodies the Mandala of Heaven and Earth", while Sangye Gyatso honored him as "His Majesty the Manjushri Emperor who holds the Wheel of Blessing and governs the universe." When Sangye Gyatso usurped the Fifth Dalai Lama's authority to confer the title "His Majesty the Great Compassionate and Universal Savior Manjushri Emperor", Emperor Kangxi firmly rejected the request.

Similarly, when facing the petition of the Dalai Lama or Sangye Gyatso, Emperor Kangxi's attitude was entirely different. In the emperor's view, the Dalai Lama and Sangye Gyatso claimed to be the "Manjushri Emperor" to maintain the coherence of Buddhism and acknowledge the subordination of the Gelug Sect, rather than to have the emperor accept the title or allow religious authority to override imperial power. Therefore, the "Manjushri Emperor" as a simple title could be permitted by the emperor. However, when Sangye Gyatso usurped the name of the Fifth Dalai Lama to petition for the "Manjushri Emperor" title, his aim was to have the emperor enfeoffed to the Gelug Sect and allow religious authority to override imperial power. At this point, the "Manjushri Emperor" held dual political and religious significance for the emperor, which is why Kangxi rejected the Fifth Dalai Lama's request for the imperial title. After this, the pure spirit of imperial power never contained the connotation of the Gelug Sect. If Kangxi had ever confirmed with the Gelug Sect that he was enfeoffed as the "Manjushri Emperor", then Sangye Gyatso could not have petitioned for the "Manjushri Emperor" title again. Sangye Gyatso's petition for the title precisely indicates that even before this, the pure spirit of imperial power did not contain the connotation of the Gelug Sect. The political and religious forms of Xizang remained strictly separate.

The administrative authority of Xizang and the ecclesiastical authority of the Gelug Sect were separate. In the eleventh year of Qianlong's reign, the emperor instructed Polongding: "The Dalai Lama is the one who propagates Western Buddhism, while you are the one who governs and manages the Tibetan people", clearly affirming the independent administrative authority of the Kashag office^[26]. Above the Drepung government or Kashag government was a dual power structure where the Khan or the Resident Minister in Tibet held administrative authority, while the Dalai Lama held ecclesiastical authority. Xizang's administration remained under the governance of the Khan or the Resident Minister in Tibet, with political and religious administrative powers not being unified. Therefore, the chaotic coexistence of administrative and religious affairs within the government did not reach a point of complete integration or indistinguishability. In summary, during the Qing Dynasty, imperial authority and ecclesiastical authority were purely separate. The administrative and ecclesiastical authorities of Xizang were distinct, and although administrative and religious affairs were sometimes combined, they did not achieve full integration. Tibet remained a region of separation between politics and religion.

Through a systematic examination of Qing dynasty archival materials related to Tibet, this paper reveals the institutional mechanisms and historical evolution of Qing sovereignty over Xizang, drawing the following main conclusions: The Qing dynasty established a stable land frontier pattern of "central government—provinces—fiefdoms", where the emperor exercised central governance over fiefdom affairs, provincial governance assisted in administration, and fiefdom governance managed local affairs independently. This framework persisted throughout the Qing dynasty, achieving long-term and effective governance over Xizang. The fiefdom governance of Xizang underwent structural iterations within the land frontier pattern, evolving from the Khutans' court to the Kashag

office, the Prince of Tibet system, and finally to the authority of the Amban in Tibet. Each evolution of governance was the result of joint efforts by central decision-making and provincial coordination. Xizang maintained a political form of separation between religion and state rather than integration, with the pure spirit of imperial authority devoid of the theocratic connotations of the Gelug sect. The emperor explicitly refused to accept religious titles from the Gelug sect, and the fiefdom governance of Xizang remained independent of Gelug religious authority. Therefore, the traditional notion of “integration of religion and state in Xizang” lacks a historical basis. The analytical framework of “land frontier pattern” proposed in this study provides a new perspective for understanding the frontier governance of traditional China. By revealing the institutional foundation of Xizang’s sovereignty during the Qing dynasty, it offers solid academic support for understanding the historical relationship between the central government and the Tibetan region, powerfully proving the undeniable historical fact that Xizang has always been an inseparable part of China. This has significant practical implications for refuting the separatist fallacy of “Xizang independence.”

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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