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# *Expedition turned Invasion: The 1888 Sikkim*

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## *Expedition through British, Indian and Chinese eyes*

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### **Abstract**

*A fresh look at the 1888 Sikkim Expedition using both Chinese and English language sources yields very different conclusions from that of previous research on the subject. During the course of policy-making, the British Foreign Office and the British Government of India did not collaborate to devise a plan to invade Tibet; conversely, their aims differed and clashed frequently. During the years leading to war, the largest newspapers in British India gave plenty of coverage to the benefits of trade with Tibet, thus influencing British foreign policy and contributing indirectly to the outbreak of war. The Tibetan army was soundly defeated in the war, while the British troops suffered only light casualties. Although the Tibetan elites remained committed to the war, the lower classes of Tibetan society quickly grew weary of it. During the war, the British made much use of local spies and enjoyed an advantage in intelligence gathering, which contributed greatly to their victory. Finally, although the war was initially fought over trade issues, the demarcation of the Tibetan-Sikkim border replaced trade issues as the main point of contention during the subsequent peace negotiations. During the negotiations, Sheng Tai, the newly appointed Amban of Tibet, tried his best to defend China's interests.*

**Keywords:** Sikkim Expedition; Lingtu Sikkim; Wenshuo Shengtai

A key event in the history of Tibet's foreign relations, the 1888 Sikkim Expedition has been the subject of much interest in the field, particularly in Chinese circles. The proposed Macauley mission to Tibet in 1886 met with resistance from the Tibetan authorities, which despatched a force to Lingtu at the Tibet-Sikkim border to intercept the mission. This immediately complicated the issue, since Sikkim's status at the time was ambiguous: it was an autonomous principality suzerain to Tibet and ultimately to China, which had, under the 1861 Treaty of Tumlong, accepted a degree of British-Indian control over its foreign relations. Notwithstanding the fact that the British were unsure that the fort erected at Lingtu was within Sikkim or Tibet, since the Sikkim-Tibet frontier had not been demarcated, the British Indian government was ultimately forced to send an expedition to eject the Lingtu garrison and eventually invade Tibet against its reservations. Since the Tibetan

Army's garrisoning of Lingtu directly led to hostilities, Western scholars have referred to the war as the "Sikkim Expedition", while Chinese scholars have chosen to focus on the subsequent phase of the conflict, referring to it as the "First British Invasion of Tibet". This raises a set of questions, such as: what were the origins of this conflict? And what was the nature of this conflict?

While giving due credit to previous generations of scholars, there are lacunae and issues pending greater scrutiny despite the impressive work that has already been done. On one hand, Western scholarship has devoted scant attention to this conflict to date.<sup>1</sup> Alastair Lamb, the doyen of modern Tibetan history, is perhaps an exception, but in his seminal work *British India and Tibet* even he did not study the lead-up to the conflict and the war itself in detail, probably owing to his omission of Chinese language sources and almost exclusive use of British archives, without consulting other similarly rich sources including newspapers, travel diaries and battle reports.<sup>2</sup> While providing a comprehensive overview of various sources in different languages, Heather Stoddard confined herself to Tibetan sources and "analyses from the point of view of political history, done at a later date", and did not consult "narratives by members of the British Raj involved with Tibet in the 19<sup>th</sup> century" as well as Chinese language sources, as she was primarily concerned with the Tibetan point of view.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, a key contributing factor to this regrettable situation in Chinese academia is the inability or reluctance of many Chinese scholars to consult English language sources. Moreover, until very recently most Chinese scholars have proved unable to erase the influence of anti-imperialist ideology, subscribing to a particular mindset that has greatly hindered research in the field. To be more precise, they tend to treat the British authorities as a monolithic unit, while drawing a line between Wen Shuo, the Amban of Tibet before the conflict (during the initial stages of the conflict, Wen Shuo had already been dismissed, but his successor Sheng Tai had yet to arrive at his post, so he remained in charge), and Sheng Tai, lauding the former for his active resistance to the British and criticising the latter harshly.<sup>4</sup> Studying the conflict using a variety of sources from multiple perspectives,

<sup>1</sup> *The Tibetan History Reader* edited by Gray Tuttle and Kurtis R. Schaeffer, which is otherwise extremely comprehensive in its scope, spanning from prehistoric to modern Tibet, does not mention the 1888 war at all. See Gray Tuttle and Kurtis R. Schaeffer (eds.), *The Tibetan History Reader* (Columbia, 2013). Discussion of the Sikkim Expedition is also missing from a recently published volume of essays on Tibetan military history, which has covered better known events such as the Gorkha Wars (1788–92) and Zhang Yintang's military reforms in 1906–7. See S. Fitzherbert and Alice Travers, 'Asian Influences on Tibetan Military History between the 17th and 20th Centuries', *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 2020, pp. 5–367.

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Lamb, *British India and Tibet, 1766–1910* (Washington DC, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Heather Stoddard, 'The Great 'Phi gling dmag zlog' of 1888. The first hands-on confrontation between Tibet and the British Raj with the participation of leading lineage holders of the '1900 Sngag mang Phur thog gos dkar lchang lo can', lay mantrins of Reb kong, Ambo, in the Dga' Idan Pho brang state military ritual to 'Turn back the Philing' Foreigners', unpublished paper from the Proceedings of the 11th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Bonn, 2006, available at [https://www.academia.edu/4117775/The\\_Great\\_Phi\\_ling\\_dmag\\_bzlog\\_of\\_1888](https://www.academia.edu/4117775/The_Great_Phi_ling_dmag_bzlog_of_1888) (accessed 8 August 2020). Given my inability to read Tibetan sources, Stoddard's work is of much value in corroborating Chinese language accounts.

<sup>4</sup> Extending this mindset even further, one would easily subscribe to the following fallacy. Since Sheng Tai, as the representative of the Qing court, was a traitorous figure, the *Zongli Yamen* and indeed the entire Qing court would naturally adopt a policy of appeasement towards the British invaders; in stark contrast to the ruling classes, the entire population of Tibet, even including the peoples of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal, were united in their opposition to the invaders. Hence, according to this line of reasoning, the court at Beijing and the local population of Tibet were diametrically opposed to each other. An executive agent of the central government, the Amban, was

however, yields a very different picture. Only then can we uncover the side of this conflict that has been obscured by anti-imperialist ideology and bias. If the dispute over the naming of this conflict (“First British Invasion of Tibet” or “Sikkim Expedition”) is merely the product of varying perspectives, then existing lacunae and erroneous conclusions in existing scholarship is reflective of more serious problems associated with ideological bias and one-sided reading of sources. Fortunately, solid groundwork in the area of sources has been laid by pioneering researchers, thus doing a great service to scholars in the field.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I analyse this conflict by drawing extensively on under-utilised sources, including newspapers in British India, Foreign Office archives, regimental battle reports, the travel diaries of British explorers and documents from the Indian National Archives, while consulting more widely used sources from the *Qingdai zangshi zoudu*, to uncover its complexity.

### Debate revolving around British Indian newspapers and travel diaries of British explorers before and during the conflict

Current research on newspapers in late nineteenth-century British India remains rather limited; to the best of my knowledge, not a single monograph or dictionary on the subject has been published to date. At the same time, reading of British Indian newspapers during this period reveals that the public sphere in British India was greatly concerned about the prospects of trade and possibility of conflict with Tibet, even engaging in heated debate on the issue. During this debate, the hawkish camp represented by *The Pioneer* based in Allahabad gained the upper hand and garnered support for waging war, hence providing popular support for starting the conflict. Scholars have conducted impressive research on the influence of British public opinion on British public policy in other contexts. In his *Merchants of War and Peace*, Chen Song-Chuan examined how British merchants based in Canton used their expertise and understanding of China to influence British policy toward China.<sup>6</sup> Recent research has also shown that during the Urabi revolt in Egypt, British public opinion legitimised the authorities’ decision to intervene militarily, in addition to directly shaping opinion toward Egypt in the House of Commons.<sup>7</sup>

ostensibly responsible for several duties including the preservation of order, the provision of disaster relief, the maintenance of frontier defence and all diplomatic negotiations in the region. The Amban also served as the sole intermediary between the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, the two theocratic rulers of Tibet, and the central government in Beijing. While the Amban’s powers were strengthened during Emperor Qianlong’s reign (1735–96), by the mid-nineteenth century the lamaist elite had regained its prominence and “the role of the Amban was reduced to the control of external relationships”. See Max Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet* (New York, 2018), p. 47, and Sabine Dabringhaus, “The Ambans of Tibet—Imperial Rule at the Inner Asian Periphery”, in Jeroen Diundam and Sabine Dabringhaus (eds.), *The Dynastic Centre and the Provinces: Agents and Interactions* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 116–117, 125.

<sup>5</sup>Chinese scholar Wu Fengpei edited and published an impressive collection of reports and memorandums by successive Ambans to the Qing court, while Australian scholar Julie Marshall has compiled historical documents relating to Tibetan, Nepalese, Sikkimese and Bhutanese relations with China and Britain. Wu Fengpei, *Qingdai zangshi zoudu* [Reports and memorandum relating to Tibetan affairs during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 1994); Julie G. Marshall, *Britain and Tibet 1765–1947: A selected annotated bibliography of British relations with Tibet and Himalayan states including Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan* (London, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>Song-Chuan Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace: British Knowledge of China in the Making of the Opium War* (Hong Kong, 2017).

<sup>7</sup>Ye Kang, Yulun jiushi zheyang zhizao de: dui aiji alabi shijian zhong yingguo baokan ‘yulun yizhi’ xianxiang de yanjiu (1881–1882) [How public opinion was created: the phenomenon of “uniform public opinion” in the Urabi revolt in Egypt (1881–1882)] (unpublished Peking University PhD dissertation, 2014), pp. 102–106.

Similarly, many signs have pointed to the fact that besides the British India government, Chinese diplomats in Britain as well as the Foreign Office also followed public opinion very closely in both British India and Britain itself. The British Foreign Office archives, for instance, include a telegram sent by the Secretary of State to Lord Dufferin, the Viceroy, in Simla on 28 May 1888 informing him that the Chinese Minister to Britain Liu Ruifen had inquired “whether authority has been given for pursuit of the Tibetans across the frontier, as alleged in Times’ telegram of 24<sup>th</sup> May”, and asked advice on how to respond if the question was repeated.<sup>8</sup> On 17 August that same year, Counsellor of the Chinese Legation in London Sir Halliday Macartney and Assistant Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Sir P. Carrie discussed recent newspaper articles on the Sikkim conflict.<sup>9</sup> On 25 February 1889, the Foreign Office sent a telegram to the Governor-General of India with an article from the Chinese newspaper *Shenbao* on the Sikkim question enclosed, while requesting that the newspaper article be returned to the Foreign Office for record keeping once done with.<sup>10</sup> On 22 April 1889, the British Minister to China John Walsham sent a telegram to the Indian Office blaming the failure of peace negotiations on “exaggerated statements in English and Indian press respecting pretensions of Resident and failure of negotiations”, even referring to their effect as being “most injurious” to reaching a compromise.<sup>11</sup>

Especially worthy of note is the fact that in 1848 the Governor of the Northwest Provinces James Thomason had begun a deliberate and systematic attempt to censor local newspapers in India, paying especial attention to articles that were considered to be seditious in nature. Up to the 1920s, the government consistently published a weekly *Report on Native Papers* that translated selected articles from Bengal (1863), the Northwest Provinces and Punjab (1864), Bombay (1868), and Madras (1872).<sup>12</sup> In the years leading up to the war, this *Report on Native Papers* included numerous articles on Tibet and Sikkim, suggesting that the British India government did not merely follow English newspapers founded and managed by Englishmen, but also paid close attention to newspapers set up by Indians and published in local languages. Between 1813 and 1835, English education was extended, jury service was opened to Indians (first to Christianised Indians and later to Hindus and Muslims), and British interest in Indian activities and opinions increased. These social and political changes boosted the growth of Indian journalism and in fact inaugurated the golden age of the field. It was precisely these developments that led to more stringent censorship in the Northwest Provinces in 1848 and the implementation of the notorious Vernacular Press Act of 1878.<sup>13</sup>

However, the British India government quickly came to realise that the strict implementation of the Vernacular Press Act had stifled Indian public opinion, hindering the authorities’ understanding of public sentiment. Thus, merely four years into its implementation, the Governor-General Ripon repealed the Act in 1882. As a result, the 1888 Sikkim

<sup>8</sup>Telegram from Secretary of State, London to Viceroy, Simla, 28 May 1888, FO 17/1108, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup>Letter from Foreign Office to Indian Office, 23 August 1888, FO 17/1108, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup>Letter from Foreign Office to Indian Office, 25 February 1889, FO 17/1109, p. 64. Unfortunately, the date of the newspaper article was not specified, and I have not been able to find the enclosed article.

<sup>11</sup>J. Walsham to Indian Office, 22 April 1889, FO 17/1109, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup>Julie F. Codell, ‘Introduction: The Nineteenth-Century News from India’, *Victorian Periodicals Review* 37, 2 (2004), p. 111.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

Expedition coincided with a state of renewed vigour in Indian journalism and public opinion after the previous phase of severe suppression. Somasekhara has pointed out that:

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in India newspapers became a force that was gradually making itself felt in political and social circles, though many infant newspapers had to close down for want of adequate finance. But yet, in spite of the financial risks involved, there was a rapid growth of the press because of increasing political tensions, improved transport and increasing readership.<sup>14</sup>

In view of this background, an analysis of Indian public opinion towards the Sikkim Expedition can throw new light on the reasons for the outbreak of conflict. Hence, one focus of this article is the content of relevant articles in *The Pioneer* and *The Madras Mail*, both of which were edited by British expatriates in India and advocated adopting a firm stand towards Tibet. They started to adopt this stand from at least 1886, building up momentum for the conflict. In the opposing camp were anti-war newspapers founded by Indians, which only devoted attention to the coming war on the eve of the actual conflict itself. Unfortunately for them, these newspapers were far less influential than their British-managed counterparts, with their opinions carrying less weight in policymaking. As a consequence, they proved powerless to avert the coming of the conflict.

As mentioned earlier, *The Pioneer* was based in Allahabad and was founded by wealthy merchant George Allen who had grown rich from managing tea plantations in northern India from 1855 onwards.<sup>15</sup> In 1872, the experienced journalist Anthony Sinnett was appointed its editor, which propelled the newspaper to new heights, so much so that contemporaries hailed it as the most influential and powerful Anglo-Indian journal.<sup>16</sup> Retired British Indian public servant C. E. Buckland included both Allen and Sinnett in his *Dictionary of Indian Biography* published in 1906, underlining that both men enjoyed fame and prestige.<sup>17</sup> The fact that the founder of *The Pioneer* was a tea magnate is particularly worthy of note: this background, together with the vested interests concerned, set the general tone for the *Pioneer* on the opening of the Tibetan tea trade.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, *The Madras Mail*, the first evening paper in that city, represented the interests of the “wealthy section of the Europeans”; most of its editorial staff were from England, and it “was to begin with, efficiently managed and adequately financed”.<sup>19</sup> These favourable circumstances endowed *The Pioneer* and *The Madras Mail* with enormous influence.

The British Indian authorities’ development of Darjeeling and the obstruction of Indo-Tibetan trade by the Qing court and Nepal also contributed to the eagerness of British

<sup>14</sup>G. Somasekhara, *Telugu Press and Indian Freedom Movement* (Raleigh, 2018), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>Uma Das Gupta, ‘The Indian Press 1870–1880: A Small World of Journalism’, *Modern Asian Studies* 1, 2 (1977), p. 233.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>17</sup>C. E. Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography* (London, 1906), pp. 11, 391.

<sup>18</sup>British journalism has always been replete with examples of businessmen turned editors or journalists, who capitalised on public opinion in their newspapers to promote their business interests. Ye Kang also noted that “*Times* journalist and newspaper business partner was only one of the multiple identities of (Charles F.) Bell; his other identity was a British businessman”. Thus, when the “Urabi government’s reforms damaged British business interests, especially the interests of prominent cotton merchants”, “Bell made use of his other role as a journalist to disseminate news about the Egyptian crisis to the British public”. See Ye Kang, *Yulun jiushi zheyang zhizao de*, pp. 123, 127.

<sup>19</sup>R. Pricila, ‘A Survey of the Press in Tamil Nadu in the Early Phase of National Movement’, *Academia and Society* 2, 2 (2016), pp. 87–88.

merchants in India to open up the Tibet market. British scholar Alastair Lamb has pointed out that “The idea of selling Indian tea to Tibet was an inevitable consequence of the development of a tea industry in the foothills of the Himalayas”; as early as the 1850s, “this possibility was being discussed by such Darjeeling residents as Dr Archibald Campbell, the then Darjeeling Superintendent and B. H. Hodgson”.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the relevant statistics paint a picture of a vibrant and rapidly expanding tea industry in Darjeeling: while its tea production in 1866 was a mere 433,715 pounds, this had grown dramatically to 6,596,456 pounds by 1882, in under two decades.<sup>21</sup>

As early as 1873, Darjeeling Superintendent J. Ware Edgar pointed out what he saw as absurd practices *en route* to Sikkim: despite the burgeoning production of Darjeeling tea, there is the “almost incredible fact that Chinese tea is imported through [Tibet] into Darjeeling for the consumption of the native inhabitants of the district, who are practically unable to obtain the tea grown on the spot”; at the same time, despite the abundance of Tibetan cattle and sheep, beef and wool could not be exported to India. As a result, he recommended that “no time be lost” in the construction of a bridge over the River Teesta and the building of a road through Sikkim, all the way to the Chola range, thus linking India and Nepal to Tibet.<sup>22</sup> A couple of years later in 1875, the Royal Geographical Society made the following appeal on its journal:

Once the intercourse between Bengal and Tibet by means of these (Himalayan) passes was frequent, and it should certainly be the aim of our rulers to restore it. The Tibetans have always shown themselves desirous to promote such intercourse, and there is certainly no reason why the policy of permitting these passes to be closed through the jealous and selfish exclusiveness of the Chinese Government should be continued.<sup>23</sup>

Worthy of note is the fact that both reports by Edgar and the Royal Geographical Society enjoyed semi-official status, and hence were capable of swaying public opinion.

Armed conflict between Tibet and Nepal from 1883 to 1885 closed the trade route through Nepal temporarily. In January and February 1886, *The Madras Mail* and *The Pioneer* rejoiced at the resumption of trade after the hiatus. On 12 January 1886, according to *The Madras Mail*, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling claimed that the volume of all goods and commodities being traded experienced an increase, with the sole exception of salt.<sup>24</sup> *The Pioneer* even proclaimed jubilantly,

Trade with Tibet is now thoroughly re-established, writes the Darjeeling News, and is very brisk indeed. Darjeeling is full of [Tibetans], and we notice this year that the quantity of wool brought in is apparently nearly treble that of former seasons. The export trade is very brisk too, and it would be difficult to guess the weight of leaf tobacco from the Rungpur (Rangpur today) and

<sup>20</sup>Alastair Lamb, *Britain and Chinese Central Asia: The Road to Lhasa, 1767 to 1905* (London, 1960), pp. 150–151.

<sup>21</sup>See R. D. O’Brien, *Darjeeling: The Sanitarium of Bengal, and its surroundings* (Calcutta, 1888), p. 61; L. S. S. O’Malley, *Bengal District gazetteers: Darjeeling* (Calcutta, 1907), p. 74.

<sup>22</sup>J. Ware Edgar, *Report on a visit to Sikkim and the Thibetan frontier in October, November, and December 1873* (Calcutta, 1874), pp. 46–50, 60.

<sup>23</sup>C. R. Markham, ‘Travels in Great Tibet, and Trade between Tibet and Bengal’, *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 19, 5 (1875), p. 342.

<sup>24</sup>*Madras Mail*, 12 January 1886, p. 4.

Julpigoree [Jalpaiguri today] districts which is passing through Darjeeling on its way to Tibet just now.<sup>25</sup>

However, this resurgence of trade proved to be short-lived. In the summer of 1885, the Bengal Government's Financial Secretary Colman Macauley, while on leave in England, took the opportunity to bypass his direct superiors in the British India government and directly convinced the newly-appointed Secretary of State for India Lord Randolph Churchill to support him in an attempt to lead a trade mission into Tibet. Macauley proceeded to Beijing to apply for a passport to visit Tibet, then went to Darjeeling in the spring of 1886 to prepare for his mission. This was seen by Tibetans as a potential invasion since Macaulay's initial plan was to include seven Europeans, an armed escort, and Sarat Chandra Das, the Bengali who was known to have spied for the British on his visit to Tibet in the early 1880s. In response to this perceived threat, the *Kashag* or the governing council of Tibet, sent troops to Lingtu at the Tibet-Sikkim border. The Lingtu garrison promptly erected a fort aimed at stopping Macauley's Tibetan mission, resulting once again in the stoppage of the Indo-Tibetan trade.

This incident ignited the fuse of the British-Tibetan conflict; from then onwards, newspapers founded and managed by British editors in India, of which *The Pioneer* and *The Madras Mail* were most prominent, adopted an increasingly hostile stance toward Tibet. Between 1886 and 1888, despite occasional calls for settling the dispute peacefully, their overall stance grew more and more belligerent. From this point onwards, the British-Tibetan dispute revolved around two issues: Sikkim and trade.

Regarding the Sikkim issue, *The Pioneer* featured an article from the *Darjeeling News* in August 1886, which claimed,

There is every likelihood of trouble between the Tibetans and the Sikkimites. In fact, if our information is correct (and we have every reason to believe it is), the Tibetans have already occupied a portion of eastern Sikkim and are keeping the Raja a sort of semi-prisoner at Choombi. The Sikkim Rajas have been used to spend the hot weather at Choombi, which is across the watershed of the Himalayas, and the Tibetans having now got hold of him and apparently mean to keep him.<sup>26</sup>

By October 1887, *The Pioneer* further claimed,

An attempt is apparently being made to manipulate Sikkim in the interests of Tibet, and the orders emanating from Chumbi, in the name of the Raja are commonly reported to have assumed a character incompatible with the maintenance of the traditional system of governing the former State. How far these orders proceed from the Raja himself and how far they are due (as is stated on good authority) to the unauthorised use of his seal by the Tibetan clique who surround him, is at present uncertain. All that is known for certain is that the Regents find themselves so embarrassed by the requirements of their chief that they have written in terms of some perplexity to the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, inviting him to come over and help them out of their difficulties.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup>*Pioneer*, 4 February 1886, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup>*Pioneer*, 23 August 1886, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup>*Pioneer*, 28 October 1887, p. 1.

All in all, *The Pioneer*, through its painstaking efforts, cultivated a weak and cowardly image of the Sikkim Raja while portraying Tibetan aristocrats as scheming and devious characters—the Tibetan aristocrats “took the king hostage to issue orders to the feudal lords”, committing all kinds of terrible acts in the name of the Sikkim Raja. Indeed, the October 1887 report mentioned, in particular, the involvement of the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, hinting that the British Indian authorities had to eradicate the insidious influence of the Tibetan aristocrats and uphold justice for the Sikkimese people.

On the question of trade, on 29 July 1886, *The Pioneer* compared the state of trade between British India and Tibet with that of Kashmir, claiming that,

The duty on shawls and on European goods passing back through India to Kashmir were omitted on our part; while, on the other hand, the Maharaja of Kashmir established a free trade-route through his dominions under the jurisdiction of two Joint Commissioners, one appointed by himself and the other by the British Government. The effect of these measures has been a great increase of the trade in a few years. Trading interests in those parts of Tibet through which the Mission will pass may necessitate similar measures; but how would a proposal to appoint Agents, Indian and Tibetan, at [Lhasa], Darjeeling, or on the frontier be regarded by the savages who occupy Tibet?<sup>28</sup>

In addition, *The Pioneer* criticised the British India government for offering too many concessions to China. A report in the newspaper on 21 August 1886 claimed,

It [the British India government] has agreed to countermand the Tibet mission at the earnest request of the Chinese Ministers, who, it is said, apprehend serious local disturbance were it persisted in. The concessions made to China are, therefore, distinct and unequivocal; and they are not purchased at what the most chauvinist of mandarins can consider a heavy price. China, on her side, promises to allow us to do whatever we may deem wise and proper in the internal administration of our Burmese province, and she also binds herself to provide trade facilities between Burma and Yunnan. Additional significance is given to the latter pledge by the agreement that a new trade convention is to be framed for the purpose of this land trade. A commission is also to be appointed for the delimitation of the frontier, and the Chinese Government promises to encourage trade between India and Tibet. It cannot fail to be observed that while we have made tangible and definite concessions, China has been only required to give moral assurances and written promises in return.<sup>29</sup>

On 5 June 1886, *The Pioneer* claimed, “Nepal is, of course, rather interested in the Mission coming to naught, as trade would be diverted more or less from Khatmandu to Darjeeling if the Mission were successful, and hence the rumours of a hostile attitude on the part of the Tibetans circulate freely among the Nepalese and filter down to India”.<sup>30</sup>

By the winter of 1887, *The Pioneer* further asserted that the British India government should not be contented with conducting trade with Tibet via Nepal, because the direct journey from Calcutta to Lhasa only took 22 days, as opposed to being “condemned to the monstrous burdens of having to follow the 45 days’ journey through [Kathmandu]

<sup>28</sup>*Pioneer*, 29 July 1886, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup>*Pioneer*, 21 August 1886, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup>*Pioneer*, 5 June 1886, p. 1.



and Nepal, in addition to being at the mercy of the Nepalese authorities".<sup>31</sup> If the 5 June 1886 article had merely expressed the dissatisfaction of the British Indian merchants at the suspension of trade after a brief revival, this December 1887 article stated in no uncertain terms that they were not going to be contented with a mere reversion to the status quo, but instead desired a fundamental change.

Of course, it would be an overstatement to say that *The Pioneer* and *The Madras Mail* clamoured openly for an invasion of Tibet at this stage. Up to late 1887, although both newspapers highlighted a strong desire on the part of British Indian merchants to trade with Tibet, their views remained relatively conciliatory. But as tensions flared in 1888, and the prospect of a British expedition into Tibet became increasingly likely, both newspapers grew more radical; at the same time, several vernacular newspapers in India voiced their opposition, to no avail.

*The Madras Mail* and *The Pioneer* reported the disappointment of the British Indian merchant community at the resolution of the crisis through diplomatic means, and on 13 and 16 January 1888 respectively started to advocate the use of force against the Tibetans. The former stated,

The Chinese are to be allowed a reasonable time to compel their vassal Lamas at [Lhasa] to withdraw their troops from Sikkim, and to throw open their country to trade with British India. Should there, however, be any undue delay recourse is to be had to forcible measures, the Tibetans are to be driven out of Sikkim, and the Lamas are to be punished for their insolence in presuming to close the road through a British-protected State against British subjects, acting under the instructions of their Government. The [Beijing] authorities, claim to possess suzerain rights over Sikkim and [Bhutan], but these pretentions [sic] cannot be recognised, and should be repudiated before they obtain the negative sanction implied by silence, and the lapse of time... That road (through Sikkim), however, is blocked by a rabble designated as soldiers by the semi-barbarous Lamas, and the might of the British Empire is defied with impunity by a handful of ragamuffins whom a single company of British troops would scatter far and wide. Mr Paul, of whose courage there can be no doubt, is said to have been supplied with a force quite adequate to master all opposition, and to clear Sikkim from the Tibetans who have presumed so much upon the forbearance of the Indian Government.<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, according to the latter,

Now, as we have before explained, this state of things is due to England waiting upon China to move: and the question arises, can such waiting be much longer continued? As things are now looking, it cannot. Moral support must be afforded to the local party in Sikkim and a warning given at the same time to the Tibetans. The easiest way of doing this is to make it known that the limit of forbearance has now been reached, and that whatever China may do the Government of India will not stand idly by and see Sikkim absorbed by the Lamas. There is no occasion for a military expedition yet: the season is not a fitting one; but the movement, say, of one Pioneer regiment to Darjeeling and its employment upon road-making into Sikkim as the prelude to active operations in the spring would probably bring both the Raja and his Tibetan friends to their senses.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup>*Pioneer*, 5 December 1887, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup>*Madras Mail*, 13 January 1888, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup>*Pioneer*, 16 January 1888, p. 1.

By this point, public opinion had exerted enormous pressure on the British India government to take punitive military action against Tibet. Charles E. Drummond Black, biographer of the Governor-General of India Lord Dufferin—Black had met Dufferin in person and checked specific details in his biography—mentioned that Dufferin was initially opposed to the Macaulay Mission to Tibet, but acquiesced under pressure from Randolph Churchill.<sup>34</sup> As late as July 1888, after the outbreak of war, Dufferin wrote to Walsham, the British Minister to China, to make clear his stand on the war in Tibet:

Recent information has come to hand from Tibet that Chinese are in reality egging on the Tibetans against us, and that large reinforcements from the Tibetan province of Kham are on their way to the frontier. I can hardly believe this. What do you think?<sup>35</sup>

Judging from the tone of this letter, Dufferin seems to have always harboured reservations towards this military action, thus offering additional evidence to support Black's assertion regarding the Governor-General's reluctance to fight the Tibetans. In addition, Rao has pointed out that,

It will be interesting to note how the Bengal Government and the Government of India reversed their respective stands on the opening of Tibet, within two decades. Previously it was the Government of India that was very active in the schemes for the opening of Tibet, whereas the Bengal Government was somewhat [skeptical] about them. Now it was just the opposite. The Bengal Government was all out for Macaulay's proposals, whereas the Government of India refused even to look at them.<sup>36</sup>

In view of this discussion, it is evident that Dufferin faced pressure from at least two quarters, namely Randolph Churchill and the Bengal Government, while the public opinion expressed in British Indian newspapers also exerted a palpable influence on him. Finally it should be pointed out that British Indian newspapers were divided into two opposing camps: the largest newspapers founded by the British mostly advocated adopting a firm stand against Tibet, even the use of force if necessary, while newspapers founded by locals mainly belonged to the pacifist camp, opposing military conflict with Tibet and even fearing Chinese military intervention.

For example, on 29 February 1888, *Urdu Guide* pointed out that the recently concluded Burmese Wars had led to financial difficulties, and this coupled with the possibility of Chinese intervention made British victory far from a foregone conclusion. Hence, the British India government ought to banish the thought of sending troops into Sikkim. On that same day, *Sahachar* pointed out that should the conflict with China turn into a protracted war, the Indian people would definitely be forced to shoulder an ever-increasing burden. On 3 March *Bangabasi*, in addition to mentioning the financial burdens entailing from the conflict, commented provocatively that the British government's sole reason for waging war was to satisfy its ego, while bringing hardship to the Indian people.<sup>37</sup> These comments elicited a harsh response from D. C. Boulger, the editor of the *Asiatic Quarterly*

<sup>34</sup>Charles E. Drummond Black, *The Marquis of Dufferin and Ava: Diplomatist, Viceroy, Statesman* (London, 1903), p. 261.

<sup>35</sup>Viceroy of India to Sir John Walsham, 18 July 1888, FO 17/1108, p. 93.

<sup>36</sup>P. R. Rao, *India and Sikkim, 1814–1970* (New Delhi, 1972), p. 71.

<sup>37</sup>India Office Records, Report of Native Papers, IOR L/R/5/14, p. 263.

*Review*, who referred to them collectively as “seditious vernacular papers of India”.<sup>38</sup> As it turned out, Boulger overestimated the influence of Indian vernacular newspapers. Their circulation was limited, which in turn limited their influence: for instance, during the period in question, *Sahachar* and *Urdu Guide* only had a circulation of 500 and 212 respectively.<sup>39</sup> That was undoubtedly a far cry from *The Pioneer*, which enjoyed a circulation of 5,000 copies.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, “vernacular newspapers in the seventies led a hand-to-mouth existence”, and “high postal rates tended to limit their circulation to local or nearby areas”.<sup>41</sup> By the 1880s, the reach and circulation of vernacular newspapers remained small, so their richer British-founded counterparts enjoyed an overwhelming advantage.

Chinese scholar Li Fusen has contended that “the opening up and control of Tibet has been the longstanding policy of the British colonialists; sensing their failure to cow the Chinese into submission, they assembled their troops... thus brazenly launching the first invasion of Tibet”.<sup>42</sup> So-called ‘British’ or ‘British colonialists’ however, were never a monolithic whole; so the use of such fuzzy concepts in much Chinese scholarship has led to generalised and ambiguous discussions that have tended to equate the “British government” with the “British Indian government”. Qin Heping, for instance, has written that “the invasion and annexation of Tibet as well as the splitting up of China have been the long-cherished wish of the British colonialists”; hence “to fulfill this dream, the British colonialists plotted really hard and engaged in foul play, capitalising on every opportunity to further their expansionist interests”. In this case, the term “British colonialists” is arguably too generic and all-encompassing.<sup>43</sup> As Alex McKay has pointed out,

... even during periods when the “Forward school” dominated policy-making, other voices within imperial government were strongly opposed to their aims and recognised where their actions would lead. The Home Government was particularly reluctant to sanction any potential expansion of British administration in South Asia, while even within the Government of India more cautious minds restrained the “Forward school” and regularly acted to prevent the implementation of their policies, opposing, for example, Chandra Das’s missions into Tibet and every step of Younghusband’s advance.<sup>44</sup>

From an exploration of British Indian newspapers of the period, it is clear that Governor-General Lord Dufferin launched the Sikkim Expedition reluctantly, in spite of his deep reservations. To the British India government, the pressing issue at hand was to consolidate its rule in newly-conquered Burma; however, in the face of mounting pressure in the form

<sup>38</sup>D. C. Boulger, ‘Our relations with the Himalayan states’, *Asiatic Quarterly Review* 5 (1888), p. 303.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 261. A scholar has pointed out that a circulation of 500–600 could be considered rather large in the context of British India, because many readers accessed the newspapers in libraries, bazaars and schools, and some better educated people even read newspapers aloud for their illiterate compatriots. But this still does not change the fact that the circulation of vernacular newspapers including the *Sahachar* lagged far behind that of better endowed newspapers founded by the British. See Codell, ‘Introduction’, p. 119.

<sup>40</sup>[https://theosophy.wiki/en/The\\_Pioneer\\_\(periodical\)](https://theosophy.wiki/en/The_Pioneer_(periodical)) (accessed 13 May 2019).

<sup>41</sup>Das Gupta, ‘The Indian Press’, p. 219.

<sup>42</sup>Li Fusen, Lun Yingguo diyici ruqin xizang [A discussion of Britain’s first invasion of Tibet], *Wuling xuekan* 38, 4 (2013), p. 109.

<sup>43</sup>Qin Heping, Xiaoyan hou de chensi—youguan 1888 nian Longtushan chongtu de zairenshi [Deep reflections after the smoke has settled—revisiting the 1888 conflict at Lingtu], *Xinan minzu xueyuan xuebao* 4 (1999), p. 41.

<sup>44</sup>Alex McKay, ‘19<sup>th</sup> Century British Expansion on the Indo-Tibetan Frontier: A Forward Perspective’, *The Tibet Journal*, 28, 4 (2003), p. 63.

of direct orders from London and public opinion within the Anglo-Indian community, Dufferin did not have much of a choice. Events moved so quickly that by the time that Tibetan troops garrisoned Lingtu, Dufferin was compelled to consider its impact on Sikkim as well as neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan.<sup>45</sup> It is perhaps instructive to note that even at this juncture, Dufferin still adopted a conservative mindset; his primary concern was the impact of the Tibetan garrisoning of Lingtu instead of the act of garrisoning itself. It is thus inaccurate to claim that he participated in the policymaking behind the expedition; instead, we could argue that he merely responded to events passively. On 14 March 1888, a day before the British ultimatum expired, British troops were poised to advance. As the Secretary of State for India explained, Dufferin had been forced into a tight spot:

The preparations of the Indian Government for repelling the Tibetans are now known to be so far advanced that, if Her Majesty's troops who are marching towards Lingtu were arrested in their progress, pending further attempts on the part of the Chinese Government to induce the Tibetan garrison to evacuate Lingtu, the motives of the Indian Government in thus suspending military operations would be exposed to serious misconstruction even beyond the borders of Tibet and Sikkim.<sup>46</sup>

On 11 June 1888, Schwann, Member of Parliament for North Manchester, questioned Sir John Gorst, the Under Secretary of State for India, "whether it is the intention of the Indian Government to carry out, with regard to [Tibet], the policy of aggression advocated by various Anglo-Indian journals under the name of the forward policy?" In response Gorst replied emphatically, "I can assure the Hon. Member that the Government of India have no intention of pursuing a policy of aggression towards [Tibet]".<sup>47</sup> Given a fuller understanding of the entire event, Gorst's reply does not seem particularly surprising.

### Wartime relations between Britain and Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal

Most mainland Chinese scholars have regarded Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal as Tibet's allies in fighting the British. For instance, Lan Guohua, a researcher at the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences, has pointed out that during the war "some Sikkimese gave intelligence regarding the British troops to the Tibetan forces at the frontline", and likewise that "some Sikkimese voiced their criticisms of British imperialist aggression in Tibet out of a deep sense of solidarity with the Chinese".<sup>48</sup> Contemporary Sheng Tai, in his memorial to the court regarding the allegiance of the Bhutanese people, even mentioned that "when I visited the frontier, one of the Bhutanese chiefs sent 1,700 soldiers to serve under us",<sup>49</sup> which is corroborated by British sources. On 25 May 1888, the Sikkim Commissioner A.W. Paul,

<sup>45</sup>Letter from Dufferin to Viscount Cross, 14 February 1888, FO 17/1108, pp. 25–26.

<sup>46</sup>Letter from Godley to Walsham, 14 March 1888, FO 17/1108, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup>Hansard (British Parliamentary papers) available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1888-06-11/debates/e5e59417-4e07-4b02-ae5f-1d1c1df7448e/India%E2%80%94Thibet%E2%80%94TheForwardPolicy?highlight=thibet#contribution-1653eab2-9c46-4175-9028-e45a5bod3387> (accessed 13 May 2019).

<sup>48</sup>Lan Guohua, Shixi nibo'er, budan, xijin zai yingguo qinzang zhanzheng zhong zhi jue—jian lun wanqing zhengfu wajiao zhi shidang [An analysis of the role of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim in the British invasion of Tibet], *Junshi lishi* 6 (2004), p. 26.

<sup>49</sup>Wu Fengpei, *Qingdai zangshi zoudi* [Reports and memorandum relating to Tibetan affairs during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 1994), p. 755.

who was with the expeditionary force at that time, wrote to Chief Secretary of the Bengal Government Edgar that the Timpoo [Thimphu] Jongpen had led 200 Bhutanese soldiers to the Rinchagong [Rinchengong] front on 8 May, adding that he himself noticed some Bhutanese in the fight and that one of the Tibetan prisoners had confirmed this.<sup>50</sup> On 9 July, Paul wrote to Edgar again, mentioning that “One thing is certain,—*the people of Sikkim and the Tibetan lower classes are firmly convinced that China is not friendly disposed to the English, but will help the Tibetans*”.<sup>51</sup> This is not to deny the fact that Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal had rendered assistance to the Tibetan forces, but this is merely one dimension of many in the complex relationship between the Himalayan kingdoms and the British forces, and a deeper discussion is certainly due in this case. Moreover, Lan Guohua has contended that “The British strengthened their grip over Nepal in the political and economic fields, extending their reach into various regions in the Himalayas with Nepal as their base, and even established Gurkha units, recruiting Nepalese youth to fight on their behalf”, and that “many Gurkha soldiers served as cannon fodder for the British invaders”.<sup>52</sup> In view of the evidence, this statement is certainly questionable.

Scrutiny of available sources reveal that most Chinese scholars have conducted their research with certain preconceived notions: since Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal were all Chinese vassal states, it has been assumed that it was only natural that they would side with Tibet against the British. Consequently, in explaining the reasons for British victory, Chinese scholars have usually drawn attention to the following factors: (1) the backwardness of Tibetan weapons; (2) tactical errors; and (3) the appeasement policy adopted by the Qing court.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the steady advance of the British troops in Tibet can be attributed to a large extent to superior intelligence gathering, their source of intelligence being precisely so-called pundits and spies. The chief intelligence agent working for the British was a Sikkimese named Tendook Pulger (also spelt Tyndook Palgar). At the start of the war, the *Pioneer* proclaimed proudly, “Mr Paul, I may add, has in Tendook Pulger, manager of the Government estates in Darjeeling, a man well versed in all the affairs of Sikkim and the intrigues of the Tibetan monks”, and that “his intimate knowledge of the route has done much to contribute to the rapidity with which Colonel Graham has gained the objective points of the expedition”.<sup>54</sup> Remarkably, at that time “almost all the managers and assistants on the estates [were] Europeans”, hence Pulger’s appointment as the manager of tea estates in Darjeeling was truly unusual.<sup>55</sup> The aforementioned

<sup>50</sup>Letter from Paul to Edgar, 25 May 1888, FO 17/1108, p. 124. This point has already been acknowledged in existing scholarship, in particular in a paper exploring the role of Bhutan in the 1888 Sikkim Expedition. See Matteo Miele, ‘The British Expedition to Sikkim of 1888: The Bhutanese Role’, *West Bohemian Historical Review* 2 (2018), p. 209.

<sup>51</sup>Letter from Paul to Edgar, 9 July 1888, FO 17/1108, p. 133. Italics in original text.

<sup>52</sup>Lan Guohua, *Shixi nibo'er, budan, xijin zai yingguo qinzang zhanzheng zhong zhi juese—jian lun wanqing zhengfu wajiao zhi shidang* [An analysis of the role of Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim in the British invasion of Tibet], *Junshi lishi* 6 (2004), p. 25.

<sup>53</sup>See Huang Hongzhao, *Yingguo qinzang zhanzheng he 1890 zhongying huiyi zangyin tiaoyue shulue* [The British invasion of Tibet, the 1890 Sino-British conference and the Tibet-India treaty], *Zhongguo zangxue* 3 (1991), p. 129; Li Fusen, *Lun yingguo diyici ruqin xizang* [A discussion of the first British invasion of Tibet], *Wuling xuekan* 38, 4 (2013), p. 109.

<sup>54</sup>*Pioneer*, 26 March 1888, p. 4. During Tendook Pulger’s tenure as estate manager, the British Indian government advanced him a loan of 3,000 rupees, which is indicative of the trust he enjoyed from the British Indian authorities. See N.a., *Finance and Revenue Accounts of the Government of India, for 1881–82* (Np, 1883), p. 191.

<sup>55</sup>L. S. S. O’Malley, *Bengal District gazetteers: Darjeeling* (Calcutta, 1907), p. 84.

9 July 1888 letter from Paul to Edgar recommended “an early recognition by Government of the services Tendook Pulger has rendered in connection with Sikkim *for many years past* (quite apart from what he has done and is doing now in the present difficulties)”, noting that this would induce more Sikkimese to side with the British.<sup>56</sup> The battle reports of the Derbyshire Regiment further pointed out that Pulger was conferred the title of Rajah for his outstanding contributions rendered in the Sikkim campaign.<sup>57</sup> Another battle report prepared by the intelligence department heaped accolades on Pulger, remarking that “His local knowledge has been at times invaluable, especially during the advance on Lingtu fort, when, by means of his assistance, we were able to avoid the spot where, as we found on our arrival, the enemy had placed large boulders above the road”.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, one of the Derbyshire Regiment’s reports for 22–31 July 1888 also mentioned that native spies had offered news of “considerable movement amongst the enemy”.<sup>59</sup> On 10 August, two Bhutanese spies revealed to the British that Tibetan troop strength between Kupup and Phari amounted to roughly 17,000, with an additional 3,500 Bhutanese reinforcements; they had observed 2,000 tents in one of the Tibetan camps, and based on that observation had deduced that Tibetan troop strength in that particular encampment was around 14,000.<sup>60</sup>

Clearly these spies who worked for the British possessed a fair degree of military knowledge and were not ordinary commoners. In that case, why were these Sikkimese, Bhutanese and Nepalis so eager to offer their services to the British troops? As mentioned earlier, Tendook Pulger, who had been won over by the British Indian government, enjoyed close relations with government officials and tea merchants, and a British victory would certainly serve to further his interests. As for the Bhutanese spies and Gurkha troops who directly participated in the fighting, besides being enticed by the pay offered by the British Indian government as mercenaries, a study of the huge influx of Nepali and Bhutanese migrants into Darjeeling and Sikkim is arguably necessary to understand their motivations for serving the British.

Existing scholarship has noted that “the actions of the British at Darjeeling made Sikkimese uneasy, especially with the labour migrants and slave trade brought about by free trade, which attracted large numbers of Nepalis and Bhutanese into Sikkim”.<sup>61</sup> Besides the genuine demand for workers, the British India government also took its political interests into consideration when encouraging and facilitating this influx of immigrants into Sikkim. A Sikkim gazetteer published shortly after the war in 1894 admitted frankly that “The influx of these hereditary enemies of Tibet [the Nepalis] is our surest guarantee against a revival of Tibetan influence”. The gazetteer’s introduction was written by British India government official H. H. Risley, and can thus be taken to reflect the British Indian authorities’

<sup>56</sup>Letter from Paul to Edgar, 9 July 1888, FO 17/1108, p. 133. The emphasis on the phrase “for many years past” in the original text shows the enormous contribution rendered by Pulger.

<sup>57</sup>Captain H. A. Iggulden, *The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Derbyshire Regiment in the Sikkim Expedition of 1888* (London, 1900), p. 103.

<sup>58</sup>Lieutenant C. J. Markham, *Report on the Sikkim Expedition: from January 1888 to January 1890* (Calcutta, 1890), p. 17.

<sup>59</sup>Iggulden, *The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Derbyshire Regiment*, p. 65.

<sup>60</sup>Markham, *Report on the Sikkim Expedition*, p. 42.

<sup>61</sup>Dawa Tsering, *Dajiling lishi guishu wenti yanjiu—jianlun xijin yu zhongguo xizang de guanxi* [A study of Darjeeling’s belonging from a historical perspective—with a discussion of the relationship between Sikkim and Chinese Tibet] *Xizang Yanjiu* 3 (2018), p. 32.

intentions.<sup>62</sup> Indian scholar Kanchanmoy Majumdar has also noted that “[the Nepalese] served the British interests as being a counterpoise to the pro-Tibetan and anti-British elements in the Lepcha population of Sikkim”.<sup>63</sup> I argue, therefore, that given the Tibetans’ garrisoning of Lingtu and possible invasion of Darjeeling (such rumours were rife at that time and led to much panic among Darjeeling residents), the Nepalese and Bhutanese immigrants in Sikkim had a strong incentive to serve the British and defend their homes and property there (contrary to existing arguments that they were conscripted forcibly to serve as cannon fodder for the British).

On the other hand, the Himalayan kingdoms of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal, which tried their best to survive in the increasingly perilous geopolitical environment, being sandwiched between Tibet and British India, were not as pro-Tibetan as has previously argued by existing scholarship. To the best of my knowledge, *Qingdai xizang yu bulukeba* [Tibet-Bhutan relations during the Qing dynasty] by Bkra-zhis Don-grub is the only monograph on Tibet-Bhutan relations to date; the author noted that “regarding the attitude of Bhutan towards the Tibet-British war, the narratives of the English language sources and Chinese language sources are completely different”, but did not proceed to elaborate or arrive at a conclusion.<sup>64</sup> Alastair Lamb has pointed out that the Tibetan army suffered a series of defeats in the face of the British offensive, forcing the Tibetans to approach the Tongsa Penlop of Bhutan for assistance, which he refused on the grounds that helping the Tibetans would provoke the British into cutting off his subsidy.<sup>65</sup> This incident illustrates aptly the pragmatism of the Bhutanese ruling class.

British scholar Michael Aris has uncovered a Tibetan poem composed by Bhutanese lamas at that time—the ambivalence expressed in its verses offers much food for thought:

#### **By command of the Sahibs in Calcutta**

The heavenly field of the Land of Snows is filled with barbarians.

Wherever one looks and ponders, sadness arises.

The proud soldiers of Tibet

Merely bellow forth like thunder their bragging din.

The story of how the appearance of those soldiers turned to corpses

Stops the tea and ale, though tasty, from going down one’s throat,

And though fresh fish and pork are eaten they are insipid.

As for the way the Dalai Lama remains in holy retreat,

It’s like hearing a never-ending story.

When you look at the nature of the present situation,

A permanent settlement for the future can’t be fixed,

<sup>62</sup>Bengal Government Secretariat, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (Calcutta, 1894), p. xxi.

<sup>63</sup>Kanchanmoy Majumdar, ‘The role of Sikkim in Indo-Nepalese relations in the nineteenth century’, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 38 (1977), p. 665.

<sup>64</sup>Bkra-zhis Don-grub, *Qingdai xizang yu bulukeba* [Tibet-Bhutan relations during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 2012), p. 216.

<sup>65</sup>Alastair Lamb, *British India and Tibet, 1766–1910*, p. 149. Also see J. Claude White, *Sikkim and Bhutan: Twenty-one years on the North-East Frontier, 1887–1908* (London, 1909), p. 290.

And so the time will come when the subsidy fetched from Buxa  
 Will have instead to be fetched from the plain of Phari.  
 Just as flowers are destroyed by hoar frost  
 So does grief arise in the depths of one's heart and being.  
 The fleeing Tibetans, lacking in intelligence,  
 Have blundered no matter how you look at it.  
 There's clearly no stopping those soldiers of the Sahibs,  
 Like flies rushing in for the first draught of ale

Those three types [of Tibetans], the lame, rheumatic and limping, are killed straight off,  
 Nor can the lassies, the girls, enjoy happiness.

Alas, at a time when the Buddhist teachings are coming to an end  
 This Land of Snow Mountains of the noble ones  
 Is being destroyed by eaters of goat-meat.  
 Those loveless, heartless Sahibs  
 Who got here by crossing many passes and valleys  
 Are delighted to gain just a tiny bit of land.  
 The time comes near when those reckless soldiers of the Sahibs  
 Will cause the utterly profound doctrine of the Great Perfection to decay.<sup>66</sup>

Judging from the content of this poem, the lama who composed it was evidently sympathetic to the Tibetans, but at the same time considered them to be rash and impetuous as well as “lacking in intelligence”, criticising them in a condescending tone. From the poem's ambivalence it would seem that this lama was experiencing conflicting emotions. Whether his attitude was representative of the entire Tibetan ruling class is open to conjecture and impossible to tell given the paucity of sources. Clearly this question warrants further investigation, perhaps with a focus on Tibetan sources.<sup>67</sup>

### British casualties during the war and the morale of the Tibetan population

In 2013 the Chinese scholar Li Fusen asserted that “Both Chinese and foreign sources have chronicled the first British invasion of Tibet in 1888 in detail, and existing scholarship has given much attention to the war, but research on the causes of the war, British economic invasion of Tibet after the war and its political, economic and societal consequences on Tibet is still lacking”. In fact, research on the war itself also remains rudimentary.<sup>68</sup> Italian scholar Luciano Petech in his *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet, 1728–1959* has made a

<sup>66</sup>M. Aris, ‘Himalayan encounters’, in *Les habitants du toit du Monde. Études recueillies en hommage à Alexander W. Macdonald*, (eds.) S. Karmay and P. Sagant (Nanterre, 1997), pp. 187–188. The original text contains a footnote “Goat-meat is not eaten in Bhutan, and it is looked down on in Tibet”. Hence the term “eaters of goat-meat” certainly refers to the British in a derogatory way.

<sup>67</sup>The only published compilation of Bhutanese sources during the Qing dynasty is Pan Meiyue and Du Jiexiang (eds.), *Qing ji bulubake (budan) hanwen shiliao jizhu* [A collection of Chinese language sources from Bhutan during the late Qing dynasty, with annotations] (Xinbei, 2018). However, the vast majority of sources collected have already been previously published in *Xizang zouyi: Chuanzang zoudi hebian* and *Qingji waijiao shiliao*. Apparently Chinese language sources alone do not shed enough light for scholars to arrive at a conclusion.

<sup>68</sup>Li Fusen, ‘Lun Yingguo diyici ruqin xizang’ [A discussion of Britain's first invasion of Tibet], *Wuling xuekan* 38, 4 (2013), p. 108.



laudable attempt to uncover the identities of Tibetan commanding officers during the war, but he does not discuss the war itself in detail.<sup>69</sup> A greater cause for concern is that several Chinese scholars have failed to consult English language sources, taking the memorandum of the Amban Wen Shuo at face value, when he claimed at the beginning of the war: “(In the second month of the 14<sup>th</sup> year of Guangxu’s reign) the British troops made two attacks on our fort; the *rtsis-dpon* (Tibetan official) in command of the garrison rallied his troops in resistance, killing the British officer leading the charge, in addition to 100 odd British and Nepalese soldiers in two days of fighting”.<sup>70</sup> Later scholars have accepted these figures unquestioningly; as recently as 2016, even *Xizang tongshi* [A complete history of Tibet], edited by leading experts in mainland Chinese academia, adopted this erroneous account unquestioningly.<sup>71</sup> A close examination of various sources is necessary to reconstruct the conflict itself.

Regarding the opening battle of the war at Lingtu, Yu Su wrote the following account in his *Qingji yingguo qinlue xizang shi* [The history of British invasion of Tibet during the late Qing]:

On the seventh day of the second month [of the lunar calendar], British troops suddenly attacked from the Zhalu pass at the foot of Lingtu, and the Tibetan troops offered resistance. Immediately the Tibetans shot dead a British soldier wearing khaki, after which the remaining British troops withdrew. On the eighth day, the British resumed their attack, while the Tibetan troops resisted fiercely. After protracted intense fighting, the Tibetans killed and wounded 100-odd British troops. During roll call, a *gyapon* [a junior officer who commanded 200 men] and 20-odd soldiers were missing. Such was the first engagement between the British and Tibetan forces.<sup>72</sup>

The vast majority of later Chinese scholars have accepted this narrative uncritically; even the much acclaimed work *Xizang tongshi* published in 2016 accepted Yu Su’s claim that “the Tibetans killed and wounded 100-odd British troops”.<sup>73</sup> According to this narrative, the outnumbered and outgunned Tibetan forces achieved an impressive kill ratio of 1:5. This begs the following questions, however: Are these figures reliable? If not, when did this myth arise, and how did it become so widely accepted in Chinese academia, so much so that it became the consensus?

Close scrutiny of the British army battle reports reveals that total casualties on 20–21 March at Lingtu were only one officer and four men wounded; both sides clashed again at Gnathong on 22 May, resulting in three dead and eight wounded for the British; another two officers and three men were wounded in the occupation of Chumbi in September (see Table 2).<sup>75</sup> Hence, the grand total of all the entire war amounted to only three dead and 18

<sup>69</sup>Luciano Petech, *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet, 1728–1959*, translation Shen Weirong and Song Liming. (Beijing, 1990), pp. 110, 120–121.

<sup>70</sup>Wu Fengpei, *Qingdai zangshi zoudi* [Reports and memorandum relating to Tibetan affairs during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 1994), p. 654.

<sup>71</sup>Deng Ruiling and Feng Zhi (eds.), *Xizang tongshi* [A complete history of Tibet] (Zhengzhou, 2016), p. 487.

<sup>72</sup>Yu Su, *Qingji yingguo qinlue xizang shi* [A history of British invasion of Tibet during the late Qing] (Beijing, 1959), p. 82.

<sup>73</sup>Deng Ruiling and Feng Zhi (eds.), *Xizang tongshi*, p. 487.

<sup>75</sup>F. G. Cardew, *A Sketch of the Services of the Bengal Native Army to the Year 1895* (N.p., 1903), p. 393. The Sikh battle reports prepared by the British intelligence department listed clearly the nature of each wound sustained by every casualty, even including details such as the position, severity and mechanism of injury. See Markham,

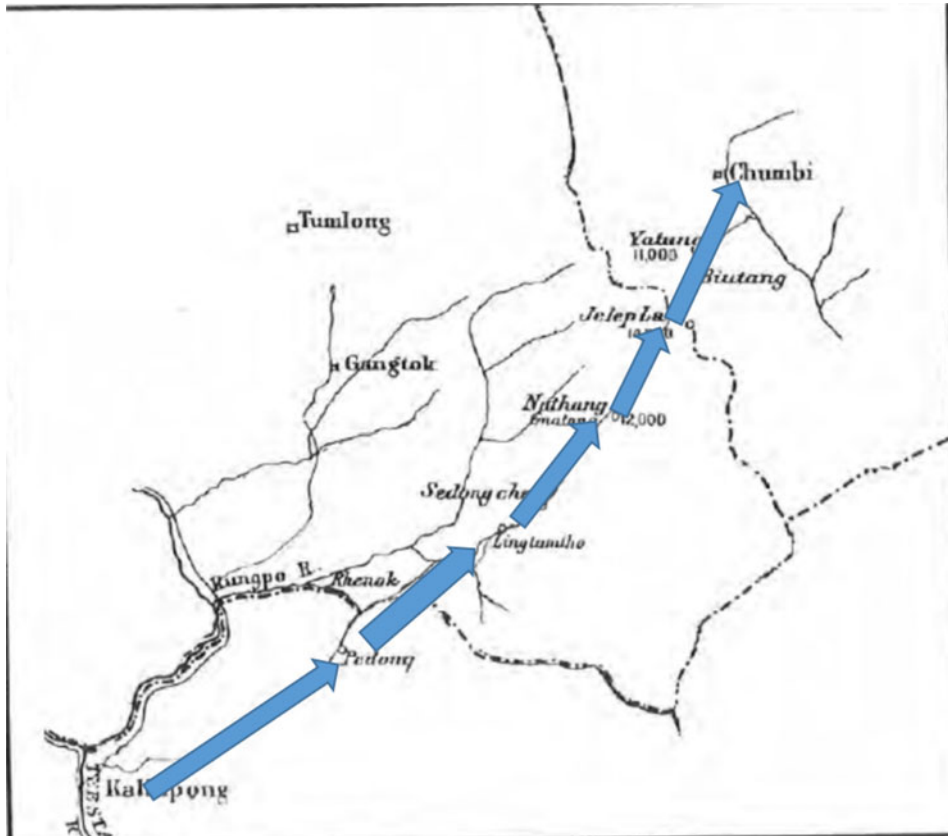


Fig 1: Route of advance of the British forces, 1888.<sup>74</sup>

wounded for the British. After the conflict had ended, the intelligence department of the British forces in India prepared a report on the lessons learnt in the war and concluded that the chief military difficulties encountered in the 1888 Sikkim expedition were: (1) unhealthy climate of Siliguri, the base depot; and (2) sickness among the transport mules, without even mentioning Tibetan resistance.<sup>76</sup> Compared to Chinese language sources, these battle reports are more reliable. First, the battle reports cited earlier were compiled mainly to learn from past experiences; given that the war was already long over by then, there was little incentive for the intelligence department to falsify casualty figures. Second, the battle reports were far more detailed—it would not be an overstatement to say that the reports were prepared meticulously to the last detail. In addition, under normal circumstances, had the small British force at Lingtu, only a few hundred strong, suffered a casualty rate of 20 per cent or more, their combat effectiveness would have been greatly diminished.

*Report on the Sikkim Expedition*, pp. 51–57. British scholar George V. Kiernan's claim that the Battle of Lingtu took place on 19 March is wrong. Besides, although Kiernan wrote that the British did not suffer any casualties at the Battle of Lingtu, while the Tibetan troops only sustained light casualties, he did not provide any footnotes. See George V. Kiernan, 'India, China and Sikkim: 1886–1890', *Indian Historical Quarterly* 31 (1955), p. 37.

<sup>76</sup>N.a., *Frontier and Overseas Expeditions from India* (N.p., 1907), p. 62.

Under such circumstances, it would have been almost impossible for the British commander to press on to Gnathong; a far more logical choice would have been to retreat or rest while waiting for supplies and reinforcements. How, then, did the highly inflated British casualty figures come about?

Tracing its origins, I have found that it first appeared in a memorial from Wen Shuo to the Qing court entitled “Translation of orders issued by Demo *kutuktu* [the regent of Tibet] to Dorje Rigzin, cautioning against carelessness resulting from two minor victories, potentially losing previous gains”.<sup>77</sup> As a secondary source, it is less reliable to start with. Tracing the flow of events, the situation at the time can be reconstructed with little difficulty: the Tibetan commander on the field Dorje Rigzin reported the inflated casualty figures to the regent, claiming to have killed over 100 British soldiers; in response, the regent, doubting the credibility of that report, cautioned Dorje Rigzin against underestimating the enemy, while Wen Shuo, upon receiving the relevant documents, was only too happy and eager to have them translated into Chinese and sent to Beijing. By the time of the second battle at Gnathong in May, the Tibetan forces retreated steadily; and Wen Shuo, who had already been dismissed from his post, could no longer boast about successes on the battlefield, even if he had wanted to. Thus, he claimed,

Xiao Zhanxian, commanding general of Gyantse, who just took over the defense of Phari Pass, sent a letter on the twenty-first day which claimed: On the twentieth day, I received a report that the Tibetan forces had clashed with the British troops on the twelfth day, resulting in casualties on both sides. The Tibetan forces lost two *gyapon* and two *dingpon* (junior officer commanding 25 men), in addition to over a hundred men killed and wounded. The British forces also lost many killed and wounded, although we do not have precise casualty figures...<sup>78</sup>

This probably represents Wen Shuo’s attempt at obfuscation by using the ambiguous expression “casualties on both sides”, in his bid to downplay the severity of the defeat and try to appear as consistent as possible with his earlier claim of having killed and wounded over a hundred British soldiers.

According to sources that I have located, the claim that the Tibetans “killed and wounded over a hundred British troops” first appeared in scholarly works and compilation of historical sources in Yu Su’s *Qingji yingguo qinlue xizang shi* and *Xizang wenshi ziliao xuanji* (published in the early 1980s).<sup>79</sup> From that point onwards, the vast majority of Chinese scholars came to accept this without question, leading to more confusion and the obscuring of the background and circumstances under which the original memorial was written. In recent years, Sun Wenlang has described the Battle of Lingtu in vivid detail, writing that the battle began on 20 March, and eventually culminated in the following scene after four days of fierce combat:

On the morning of 20 March, the British charged the Tibetan position under supporting artillery fire and entered the Tibetans’ ambush zone... On the fourth day, the British launched another large-scale attack. The Tibetan defenders resisted valiantly using flintlock muskets and rocks. After

<sup>77</sup>Wu Fengpei, *Qingdai zangshi zoudi* [Reports and memorandum relating to Tibetan affairs during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 1994), p. 654.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 690.

<sup>79</sup>Xizang zizhiqu zhengxie wenshiziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Xizang wenshi ziliao xuanji* [A selection of literary and historical materials relating to Tibet] Vol. 7 (Lhasa, 1985), p. 17.

another half day of fierce fighting, the Tibetans at the front line had exhausted their ammunition. One of the Tibetan soldiers shouted, “Get the ammunition here quickly!” That remark was overheard by a wounded British soldier, who quickly reported it to his superiors. Realizing that the Tibetans had run out of ammunition, the British blasted the Tibetans’ trenches with heavy artillery.<sup>80</sup>

From what I have managed to track down, this anecdote can only be found in the *Xizang wenshi ziliao xuanji*. If it is indeed ‘fact’, it would be illogical for the British army battle reports to omit such an important episode. Hence, it would seem that Sun Wenlang cited the *Xizang wenshi ziliao xuanji* directly, despite its questionable reliability, given the omission of footnotes attributing the origin of this anecdote.<sup>81</sup>

In addition, Chinese scholarship is more or less unanimous in claiming that the entire Tibetan population was united in anti-British resistance and maintained high morale throughout the conflict. The following narrative by Su Faxiang can be regarded as typical:

In the fourth month of 1888, according to the Tibetan calendar, every household in Lhasa was seen burning incense and strips of paper with blessings written on them, praying to the Buddha to bless the Tibetan army in their struggle to recover lost territory and expel the British invaders from Tibet and Darjeeling. Monks at the Jokhang temple and Three Great Temples engaged in grand ceremonies to pray to the Buddha and bless the troops at the front, while wishing for a speedy conclusion to the war and a return to peace. In addition, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama also ordered the Three Great Temples of Tibet to rally the monk-soldiers in the defence of Tibet. At the same time, the Dalai Lama ordered a few dozen prominent lamas to gather in the Potala Palace to chant curses secretly, cursing the British with defeat and praying for Tibetan victory, indicating that all classes of Tibetan victory were committed to the anti-British resistance.<sup>82</sup>

Furthermore, the *Xizang difang lishi ziliao xuanji* [Selected historical materials on Tibet], edited by Peking University’s History Department, also includes an official letter presented by the abbots and secular heads of all the main temples in the entire Tibet to the *kashag*, which reads as follows:

When dealing with these people (referring to the British invaders of Tibet), all of us Tibetans, regardless of where we may be, shall endeavour to negotiate with them amicably. If they can be persuaded to turn back, then all is well and good; if not then we guarantee to fight to the last man, and even our womenfolk will fight to the end.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>80</sup>Sun Wenlang, ‘Tushu zhizhan—xizangren de diyici kangying zhizhan’ [The war in the year of the Earth Rat—the first anti-British war of the Tibetans], *Dang’an shikong* 9 (2003), p. 26.

<sup>81</sup>Xizang zizhi qu zhengxie wenshiziliao yanjiu weiyuanhui (ed.), *Xizang wenshi ziliao xuanji* [A selection of literary and historical materials relating to Tibet] Vol. 7 (Lhasa, 1985), p. 17. It also seems improbable that the British soldier would have understood Tibetan, since none of the British members of the expedition were known to have learned Tibetan.

<sup>82</sup>Su Faxiang and Tashi Dolma, ‘Lun Longtushan zhanyi jiqi zai zhongguo jindaishihang de diwei’ [A discussion of the Battle of Lingtu and its significance in modern Chinese history], *Zhongyang minzu daxue xuebao* 1 (2006), p. 87. This has been corroborated by a letter written by Bka’-drung Nor-nang Dbang-'dus-tshe-ring, a Tibetan official and poet, to a Mr Snyan-grong. The poem contained in the letter mentions “Worrying for that reason, some monks/ Expert in the practice of prognostication and profound, fierce mantras,/ Endeavour to direct upon the heads of the enemy host/ The thunderbolts which reduce to dust whatever they touch”. See N. L. Normang and L. Epstein, ‘Correspondence relating to the Anglo-Tibetan War of 1888’, *The Journal of the Tibet Society* 2 (1982), p. 82.

<sup>83</sup>History Department of Peking University (ed.), *Xizang difang lishi ziliao xuanji* [Selected historical materials on Tibet] (Beijing, 1963), p. 159.

Thus, on the one hand, Chinese scholars have tended to paint a largely uniform narrative of an epic struggle and a lost cause, underlining that the entire Tibetan population resisted the Qing court's traitorous policies while fighting the British, as well as how their heroic efforts eventually came to naught. Western scholarship, on the other hand, has neglected the question of Tibetan morale and willingness to fight in this conflict. My reading of both Chinese and English language sources suggests that tension between the pro-war and pro-pacifist factions within the Tibetan camp has been obscured by the tensions between Tibet and the Qing court as well as Tibet and the British, which have tended traditionally to be emphasised in existing scholarship.

Besides ideological concerns, another key reason for this is a fixation on the Tibetan elites and selective use of sources. This has led to obvious contradictions in the narratives of some scholars. For instance, the *Xizang bainian yanjiu* has mentioned that when tensions escalated rapidly on the eve of the conflict, the Tibetans “geared up for war, mobilising the entire population to actively resist the British”. Even after the setback at Lingtu, “both the army and the civilian population were neither intimidated by the barbaric invasion of the British troops, nor taken in by their devious diplomatic manoeuvres; they prepared actively for the eventual counteroffensive”.<sup>84</sup> According to this narrative, the morale of the entire Tibetan population was clearly extremely high as they were prepared to resist to the last man. However, when the author went on to analyse the reasons for Tibetan defeat, he pointed out that “the Tibetan soldiers were not mobilised sufficiently and did not undergo proper training, so they did not understand why they had to fight... as a consequence, Tibet's anti-British struggle was confined to the minority, that is, the aristocrats and monks who belonged to the elite, and was not carried out systematically or based on clear knowledge of self or the enemy”.<sup>85</sup> The author also cited Sheng Tai's memorial to the Qing court, which mentioned that “since the outbreak of hostilities in Tibet, many Tibetans who were subject to corvée labour deserted to escape hard labour and heavy taxes, resulting in nine houses out of ten being emptied”.<sup>86</sup> This narrative suggests that the Tibetan population had been hugely demoralised and had lost its fighting spirit. In that case, which narrative is a more accurate reflection of the situation at the time?

First, it can be established that the Tibetan elite, as represented by the Three Great Temples, was staunchly anti-British. The issue is that their belligerent rhetoric was unrepresentative of the sentiments of the entire Tibetan population. Stoddard has also suggested that during the initial stages of the conflict, the Tibetan authorities in Lhasa might have been deluded by the *mying ma pa* yogins—religious leaders from northeastern Tibet who happened to be in central Tibet on a pilgrimage—into believing that the British had been defeated.<sup>87</sup> In reality, even before the outbreak of war, the *Zongli Yamen* had already expressed doubts to Wen Shuo regarding the heroic claims made by the Tibetan clergy, pointing out that “the Tibetans are not necessarily united, and their pledges to fight to

<sup>84</sup>Pema Namgyal et al. (eds.), *Xizang bainian shi yanjiu* [A study of the past 100 years of Tibetan history] (Beijing, 2015), p. 198.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>86</sup>Wu Fengpei, *Qingdai zangshi zoudi* [Reports and memorandum relating to Tibetan affairs during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 1994), p. 740.

<sup>87</sup>Stoddard, ‘The Great ‘Phi gling dmag zlog’ of 1888’, p. 12.

the last man should be taken with a pinch of salt”, after which Wen Shuo conveyed this message to the Tibetan clergy.<sup>88</sup> These doubts were left unheeded, and came true eventually. As mentioned earlier, the Tibetan populace lost the will to fight very quickly, following the deterioration of the war situation. As the retreat turned into a rout, the discipline of the Tibetan forces quickly disintegrated. In Sheng Tai’s words,

Since the Tibetans were defeated on the thirteenth day of the fourth month, they did not consider how to resolve the conflict by peaceful means, but instead requested for reinforcements from all over Tibet, which advanced to the Pakri front via narrow paths. These soldiers were all replacements for the original recruits, drawn from unemployed vagabonds, just like the renegade forces in the interior provinces. Once recruited into the army, they harassed the civilians along the way, engaging in loot and plunder. Their officers could not restrain them, and the lawful civilians suffered a great deal at their hands. To make matters worse, the Tibetan commissary cut the supplies available, causing discord within the army. The troops have no fighting spirit and everyone is grumbling.<sup>89</sup>

Closer inspection of the memorials sent to the Qing court during Sheng Tai’s tenure as Amban reveals that this is far from an isolated case. In his later memorials, Sheng Tai complained “in times of war, it is most difficult to recruit porters and procure horses”, and that “after this defeat, the Tibetan barbarians conscripted men into the army throughout Tibet, causing civilians to flee upon hearing this news, making it difficult to recruit porters and procure horses, and the army rations procured have also yet to arrive, making me anxious all day and night”. As this shows, the Tibetan populace had truly lost the will to fight on, which seriously affected the logistics and supplies of the Tibetan army.<sup>90</sup> Even more pointedly, Sheng Tai wrote, “based on my observation of the Tibetan situation, the Tibetans do not harbour a strong hatred for the enemy, many Tibetan soldiers have deserted to the enemy following their defeat, and civilians in areas touched by the war resent the authorities for conscription of labour; should the war resume when the entire populace is demoralised, the consequences are beyond imagination”. He added, “the entire Tibetan army is cowering in fear and has no wish to fight; upon hearing that those in power are still contemplating military action, every soldier curses them behind their backs and plans to desert the army”.<sup>91</sup>

Logical reasoning might suggest that the newly-appointed Amban Sheng Tai ought to have tried his best to impress his superiors in Beijing by proving his ability to control the situation in Tibet. His memorials, which paint a dismal picture of the chaos in Tibet, runs contrary to this reasoning. Yet, surprising as it might seem, it appears to be more reliable for precisely this reason. Writing about the solidarity of the Tibetan army and civilians in resisting the British, Chinese scholars have pointed out that the *kashag* conscripted men from all over Tibet. For example, a biography of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, published in the early 1980s, reads:

<sup>88</sup>He Wenxuan (ed.), *Qingchao zhuzang dachen dashiji* [Important events regarding the Amban during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 1993), p. 398; Wu Fengpei, *Qingdai zangshi zoudu* [Reports and memorandum relating to Tibetan affairs during the Qing dynasty] (Beijing, 1994), p. 648.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 740.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 744, 746.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*

After Lingtu fell to the enemy, the Kashag ordered the militia in Inner Tibet and the Kham region to reinforce the front line; Thon Mi Lha Steng Sras and Rste Co Ne Sonam Gyaltsen commanded 900 militia from Kongpo, being the first wave of reinforcements, leaving for the front on the sixteenth day of the second month [Tibetan calendar]. Phunkang Sras and Rste Co Ne Byams Pa Rnam Rgyal commanded 1000-odd militia from the Kham district, setting off for the front line. Later several thousand militia from Bome, Shuobanduo, and Kequ proceeded to the front. A total of 10,000-odd militia proceeded to the front.<sup>92</sup>

Most importantly, the conscription of militia throughout Tibet cannot be regarded as evidence of the Tibetans' strong hatred for the British; from the plunder and looting of the routed Tibetan troops, it was precisely the conscription and heavy taxes that were responsible for the Tibetans' resentment.<sup>93</sup> The mere fact that the *kashag* was forced to mobilise manpower and resources throughout Tibet indirectly points to the rapidly deteriorating war situation in Tibet, because if the Tibetan troops in the vicinity of Lingtu and Chumbi alone were sufficient to defeat the British, the *kashag* would have had no need for such mass mobilisation.<sup>94</sup> Sources from the British side from during and shortly after the war also indicate that the Tibetans' morale was low, with some Tibetan soldiers even deserting to the British camp. In his letter to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, the Commissioner of Sikkim Paul mentioned that of the 140 Tibetans taken prisoner at the Battle of Tukola Pass, 27 came from Taya and 36 from nearby Chiamdo, whereas there were no regulars from Lhasa.<sup>95</sup> This observation hints at the fact that the local militia from various regions of Tibet were demoralised, even if the regular forces at Lhasa, who were as yet unbloodied by the conflict, remained willing to fight. Major L. A. Waddell, serving in the British Indian Army at that time, recalled soon after the war that the locals at Chumbi had told him that Chinese and Tibetan officials did not receive any salary from Beijing and were rapacious; precisely for that reason, they welcomed the British occupation of Chumbi.<sup>96</sup> The Gazetteer of Sikkim published after the war confirmed the breakdown of morale and supplies in the Tibetan army:

Nevertheless, though the lamas knew it not, their obstinacy, wasting itself on our defensive tactics, was daily bringing us nearer to the real object of the campaign. At relatively small cost

<sup>92</sup>Ya Hanzhang, *Dalai lama zhuan* [Biography of the Dalai Lama] (Beijing, 1983), p. 126.

<sup>93</sup>According to the British army intelligence reports in the National Archives of India, the *kashag* requisitioned saltpetre, sulphur, and lead from civilians throughout Tibet for the manufacture of gunpowder. See Extract from the diary of the Assistant Superintendent, Bussahir, for the week ending 27 October 1888, File No. Pros. May 1889, Nos. 259—391, PR\_000005002569, National Archives of India; Copy of a letter from the Revd. J. Weber, Moravian Missionary, to the Deputy Commissioner of Simla, dated "Poo". the 30<sup>th</sup> October 1888, File No. Pros. May 1889, Nos. 259—391, PR\_000005002569, National Archives of India.

<sup>94</sup>Analysing this phenomenon, Lieutenant Colonel Graham of the British artillery arrived at a somewhat different conclusion, pointing out that "Prisoners taken came from all districts of Tibet, proving that the Central Government of Lhasa was implicated in this invasion and that their probably intention was the annexation of Sikkim, if the Indian Government had remained passive". I do not agree with his analysis, because if the *kashag* had indeed planned to annex Sikkim, they could have done so in 1887, when the Sino-British negotiations over the Macauley Mission entered a stalemate, instead of waiting until 1888. Also, in that case the *kashag* would have stationed large numbers of troops at Lingtu and its environs, instead of the tiny force of only 300 men. See A. T. J. Graham, 'The Sikkim Field Force of 1888 and its commander', *Journal of Royal Artillery* 87 (1960), p. 13.

<sup>95</sup>A. W. Paul to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 2 November 1888, File No. Pros. May 1889, Nos. 259—391, PR\_000005002569, National Archives of India.

<sup>96</sup>Major L. A. Waddell, *Among the Himalayas* (Westminster, 1899), p. 280.

to ourselves, we were wearing out the resources of Tibet, and leading her on to strike the blow which should be our opportunity. The prisoners taken at Gnatong confirmed the reports received from our officers in Almora and Ladakh, that forced levies had been beaten up from the most distant provinces, and were fed and kept together with the utmost difficulty.<sup>97</sup>

Analysing the reasons behind the Tibetan army's poor fighting capabilities, Chinese scholars have pointed out that:

The Tibetan army lacked a corps of regulars, which should have been set up; [Sheng Tai] once said that “besides 3,000 men under the command of a daipon and several hundred men from the Kongpo region, considered the most reliable troops in the entire Tibet, the rest of the Tibetan army was only a rabble”—while this is a bit of an exaggeration, it is nonetheless true that the Tibetan army's fighting capability was weak.<sup>98</sup>

While the authors referred to Sheng Tai's assessment of the Tibetan army as “a bit of an exaggeration”, they were unable to explain the reasons behind this “exaggeration” satisfactorily. The most likely scenario was that the authors had previously described how the Tibetan army possessed high morale and was united in the anti-British struggle, and hence struggled to reconcile this picture with Sheng Tai's description of the Tibetans as a mere “rabble”. Given such a situation, the authors were compelled to explain this incongruity by introducing ambiguity, that is referring to a source that reflected the true state of affairs in Tibet as “a bit of an exaggeration”.

### Sheng Tai's performance at the peace negotiations

To date, Chinese scholars are nearly unanimous in denouncing Sheng Tai as the villain who implemented the Qing court's traitorous policies at the peace negotiations. For instance, Chinese scholars Wang Haiyan and Wang Xing have pointed out that:

During the war, the *kashag*, the clergy, the Tibetan people as well as the Amban system represented by Wen Shuo resisted the British actively. But the Qing government feared the British offensive and thought that suing for peace was the only feasible option available. So the government dismissed Wen Shuo and ordered the pacifist Sheng Tai to conduct negotiations at the front, while sending James Hart of the Chinese Customs as his assistant. Once Sheng Tai assumed his post, he disbanded the Tibetan army and kept conceding ground to the British, aggravating the tensions between the Central Government and the Tibetan authorities.<sup>99</sup>

Here the authors put the Tibetan authorities and Wen Shuo in one camp, with the Qing court and Sheng Tai in the opposing camp, thus arguably oversimplifying the issue and failing to do justice to Sheng Tai. Several scholars have even accused Sheng Tai of being “servile to the foreigners to sue for peace at all costs”, and “implementing the Qing court's pacifist

<sup>97</sup>Bengal Government Secretariat, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (Calcutta, 1894), p. xix.

<sup>98</sup>Hou Jian, Chen Guangrong, *Xizang difang banfengjian banzhimindi shehui de kaiduan—Longtushan zhan yi qianxi* [The beginnings of semi-feudal and semi-colonial Tibet—a brief analysis of the Battle of Lingtu], *Xizang yanjiu* 3 (1988), p. 45.

<sup>99</sup>Wang Haiyan and Wang Xing, *19 shiji mo 20 shiji chu yingguo qinlue xizang de yingxiang—yingzang zhanzheng zhi ximula huiyi de pochuan* [The impact of British aggression of Tibet during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries—from the British-Tibetan war to the failure of the Simla Conference], *Shandong ligong daxue xuebao* 19, 3 (2003), p. 51.



policy faithfully and thoroughly”, claiming that “Sheng Tai’s actions seem like that of a British Indian official, wanting to safeguard the British Indian Government’s interests at all costs”, and vilifying him in the process.<sup>100</sup> However, if Sheng Tai had been as compromising towards British interests as most Chinese scholars have claimed, why did the negotiations drag on for over a year? At that time one of the main points of contention was the Sikkim issue. As early as the early twentieth century, a British scholar, Bayley, noted that Sheng Tai first attempted delaying tactics in the negotiations, then insisted on Chinese suzerainty over Sikkim, causing the negotiations to break down in late January 1889.<sup>101</sup> Indian scholar Dhanalaxmi has also asserted that “In 1889 in [the] course of negotiations with the British Government regarding the Sikkim–Tibet boundary issue, China strongly asserted its suzerainty over Sikkim”.<sup>102</sup> Taiwanese scholar Feng Mingzhu has pointed this out still more clearly:

By this time the Indo–Tibetan dispute was no longer about about the question of Tibetan troop withdrawal from Lingtu; the British further requested Tibet’s Sikkim as a protectorate and drew the Sikkim–Tibet border. Sheng Tai and the Zongli Yamen disagreed on whether to accede to this British request. Sheng Tai felt that although Sikkim had already been leased to the British, now that the Raja of Sikkim insisted on pledging allegiance to China, the Qing court should continue to acknowledge this relationship, and given that Sikkim was Tibet’s vassal, should Beijing accede to this request by the British, the Tibetans would probably create trouble; taking the opposite view, the Zongli Yamen felt that since Sikkim had already signed the lease treaty with Britain, nothing more could be done...<sup>103</sup>

Thus, Sheng Tai’s stand regarding Sikkim was even more intransigent than that of the *Zongli Yamen*. Based on accounts from the British diplomatic staff who were present at the negotiations, Sheng Tai discharged his duties reasonably well. British India’s then Foreign Secretary Mortimer Durand recorded the following exchange in his diary with glee and gratification:

...he answered that he was only a civil mandarin, and that a military mandarin might manage better. Then, in case I had not understood the hint, he had the cheek to say, laughingly but meaningly [sic], that unless he and I came to terms, it might be a question of war between England and China. I replied, also laughing, that I should regret such an occurrence, but that I should have no doubt as to the result, that he would find the English much better at fighting than negotiating. I added that a war between England and China would not be decided in Sikkim, but where the last war was decided. Then he shut up like a telescope, with profuse apologies for his “joke”.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>100</sup>Rong Wang, Ying diguo zhuyi ruqin xizang de lishi shishi fenxi [An analysis of the facts behind British imperialist aggression of Tibet], *Xizang fazhan luntan* 5 (2004), p. 31; Sun Wenlang, Tushu zhizhan—xizangren de diyici kangying zhizhan [The war in the year of the Earth Rat—the first anti-British war of the Tibetans], *Dang’an shikong* 9 (2003), p. 27; Zhou Juan, 1616 nian zhi 1959 nian de budan yu zhongguo xizang guanxishi yanjiu [A study of the relations between Bhutan and Chinese Tibet, 1616–1959] (unpublished Lanzhou University PhD thesis, 2007), p. 89.

<sup>101</sup>Steuart Colvin Bayley, ‘The Sikkim Expedition of 1888’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 58, 3005 (1910), p. 736.

<sup>102</sup>Ravuri Dhanalaxmi, *British Attitude to Nepal’s Relations with Tibet and China (1814–1914)* (New Delhi, 1981), p. 90.

<sup>103</sup>Feng Mingzhu, *Zhongying xizang jiaoshe yu chuanzang bianqing* [Sino–British negotiation over Tibet and affairs of the Sichuan and Tibetan frontier] (Beijing, 1997), p. 118.

<sup>104</sup>Percy Sykes, *The Right Honourable Sir Mortimer Durand: A biography* (London, 1926), p. 166.

While Sheng Tai's image in the above encounter could hardly be described as bold and uncompromising, it was at least a far cry from being "servile to the foreigners to sue for peace at all costs", as alleged in mainstream Chinese historical writing. Besides, despite having to negotiate from a position of weakness, Sheng Tai, in his role as the Amban, nonetheless won the grudging respect of the British, who, for instance, pointed out that "They [the Sikkimese and Bhutanese] will hardly be aware of concessions made in [Beijing], still less understand them as derogatory to ourselves: they will only see that the [Amban] has no power or authority with us, and he will consequently return to [Lhasa] discredited in their eyes".<sup>105</sup> Indeed, I have only managed to find three theses and journal articles which adopt a more sympathetic and empathetic attitude to Sheng Tai; as well as being few and far between, they lack support from English language sources as well as engagement with Western historiography.<sup>106</sup> Since the role of Sheng Tai is crucial to our understanding of the Sikkim Expedition, it is imperative that we study sources from all sides to arrive at a more nuanced judgement.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the naming of the 1888 Tibet-British war as the "Sikkim Expedition" and the "First British Invasion of Tibet" by Western and Chinese scholars respectively reflects a difference in perspective. From the perspective of the British Indian Government, the policy makers at that time had no intention of invading Tibet, and issued repeated orders to Colonel Graham, the commanding officer in the field, to refrain from entering Tibet; from the Tibetan perspective, however, in the event not only did the British threaten the Tibetan vassal of Sikkim and cross the boundary into Chumbi, the Chinese were eventually forced to sign the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 under duress. The Governor-General of British India Dufferin had never been enthusiastic about sending troops into Tibet, but he had been forced to go along with the invasion under orders from London as well as thanks to pressure from Anglo-Indian public opinion, whose momentum had been building up for some time. This gave rise to a most interesting phenomenon: although the war broke out initially over trade issues, in the subsequent negotiations, trade issues were clearly subordinate to the issue of border demarcation and suzerainty over Sikkim. It was precisely for this reason that Durand first wrote in his memorandum that "in themselves trade and intercourse with Tibet are really worth very little", before adding, "As a secondary object I was instructed to obtain if possible the concession of trade facilities; but I was not to insist upon this point".<sup>107</sup>

<sup>105</sup>Memorandum by A. W. Paul, 30 December 1888, File No. Pros. May 1889, Nos. 259–391, PR\_000005002569, National Archives of India.

<sup>106</sup>For instance, Zhu Shaoshuai has asserted that "although China lost many rights at the Tibet-India Treaty signed at the Sino-British conference, the inclusion of every clause involved negotiations between the Amban and Tibetan authorities, as well as hard fought negotiations with the British by the Amban". Zhu Shaoshuai, *Zhuzang dachen yu xizang diyici kangying zhanzheng* [The Amban and the first anti-British war in Tibet] (unpublished Tibet University MA thesis, 2010), p. 52. Besides, see Liang Zhongcui, 'Yingguo qinzang "xianxingzhe" zhi kelaode huaita shuping' [A discussion of Claude White, the "pioneer" of the British invasion of Tibet], *Hubei minzu xueyuan xuebao* 5 (2016), p. 52; Wang Xiaoyun, *Qingmo zhongying xizang difang tiaoyue yanjiu* [A study of Sino-British treaties signed in Tibet during the late Qing] (unpublished Northwest Normal University MA thesis, 2007), p. 28.

<sup>107</sup>Memorandum by H. M. Durand, 1 January 1889, FO 17/1109, p. 48; Memorandum by H. M. Durand, 1 January 1889, FO 17/1109, p. 70.

It seems understandable that Chinese and Western scholars should name this war differently and disagree regarding the initial intentions of the British Indian authorities; however, the fact that Chinese academia remains unable to conduct arguably objective and unbiased scrutiny of details, including British casualty figures, must be a matter of regret. As early as the late 1970s, Immanuel C.Y. Hsu posited in his “Modern Chinese Diplomatic History” that “The study of Chinese diplomatic history must be multi-archival, multilingual, interdisciplinary, intercultural, and interideological”.<sup>108</sup> What I have attempted here is simply to put these principles, still very relevant today, into practice, with the aim of filling existing lacunae in current scholarship and dispel longstanding myths in Chinese scholarship; should the opportunity arise for closer scrutiny of this conflict using sources from Sikkim, Bhutan, and Nepal, this would offer further room for deeper research.

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<sup>108</sup>Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, ‘Modern Chinese Diplomatic History: A Guide to Research’, *The International History Review* 1, 1 (1979), p. 102.