

Administrative Restructuring and State Consolidation in Sichuan and the Tri-Province Border Region during the Early Qing Dynasty, 1644–1735

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Abstract

This study investigates the transformations in Sichuan's administrative divisions from 1644 to 1735, focusing on the interplay between demographic shifts and political turmoil. By examining historical records from Qing central government documents, local archives, and other primary sources, the study establishes that fluctuations in population directly influenced the number of county-level administrative divisions. When the population declined, administrative units were abolished or merged; conversely, population growth led to the reinstatement or establishment of new divisions. Additionally, political unrest, particularly in border areas, necessitated adjustments to provincial boundaries between Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. These adjustments not only reflected demographic and political realities but also served the Qing central government's broader aim of consolidating power. The findings offer insights into the historical foundations of Sichuan's current administrative structure and propose strategies for managing contemporary demographic and political dynamics.

Keywords: Administrative Division; Change; Qing Dynasty; Population; Political Unrest.

INTRODUCTION

Sichuan, historically referred to as “Chuan” or “Shu,” has long held strategic importance in the administrative structure of China. Located in the upper reaches of the Yangtze River and encircled by mountain ranges, the region has served as both a defensive stronghold and a centre of agricultural and commercial development. The incorporation of Sichuan into the Qin state in 316 BCE marked its formal integration into China's imperial governance system, where the “Prefectures and Counties” model became the cornerstone of territorial administration. As Zhou Zhenhe observed, the establishment of administrative divisions was fundamentally linked to the rise of a centralised state, and this system has undergone continuous evolution ever since (Zhou 2001a, 47).

Administrative divisions refer to the segmentation of national territory by the central government into hierarchical administrative areas. Each area is governed by local authorities

entrusted with administrative, military, financial, judicial, and other powers (Zhou 2009, 2). These divisions consist of levels, boundaries, and sizes, with the hierarchical level forming the most fundamental element. Zhou Zhenhe categorises China's administrative evolution into county-level divisions, unified county divisions, and higher-level divisions (Zhou 2001b, 32).

County-level administrative divisions represented the most stable and fundamental units of governance. Officials appointed at this level were directly responsible to the central government and managed the day-to-day lives of residents. As noted by Charles O. Hucker, these officials were regarded as the emperor's full representatives and were often called "father-and-mother officials" due to the breadth of their duties (Hucker 1985, 240).

By the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), this structure had developed into a more complex three-tier hierarchy of provinces, prefectures, and counties. Provinces formed the highest level, prefectures functioned as intermediate administrative units, and counties remained the lowest but most crucial level. This hierarchical expansion reflected the increasing complexity of governance as the Qing Empire grew in population and territory.

This historical progression demonstrates that China's administrative system has never been static. Each dynasty adjusted administrative structures according to shifting political, economic, and social conditions. These changes were often strategically motivated to consolidate central power and improve governance efficiency.

Administrative adjustments involve not only redefining hierarchical levels but also modifying boundaries, merging divisions, and restoring previously abolished units. These are not ad hoc reforms but calculated responses to evolving challenges such as population density, geographic accessibility, and political stability.

For example, between 1644 and 1735, the Qing central government implemented major changes in Sichuan's administrative landscape in response to population collapse, recovery, and frontier unrest. County-level divisions were abolished or merged when population declined and later reinstated when numbers recovered. In politically volatile border areas with Yunnan and Guizhou, the Qing government abolished the hereditary *Tusi* system and redrew provincial boundaries into a strategic "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" pattern. These reforms not only addressed immediate demographic and political challenges but also strengthened centralised authority.

This article argues that the Qing central government's administrative adjustments in Sichuan were not routine bureaucratic measures but strategic responses to regional crisis and imperial governance needs. By analysing how demographic shifts and political instability shaped administrative restructuring, this study reveals how administrative policy functioned as an essential tool of Qing statecraft in consolidating control and maintaining order. To understand how these reforms unfolded, it is essential to examine the demographic and political context that shaped Sichuan's transformation during the early Qing period.

Demographic Collapse, Border Instability, and the Qing Administrative Response in Sichuan (1644–1735)

In 1644, Zhang Xianzhong established the Xi Dynasty (1644–1647) in Sichuan, initiating a period of brutal rule. Concurrently, the newly established Qing central government engaged in a prolonged struggle with the Xi Dynasty for control of Sichuan Province. To consolidate its authority in the region, the Qing central government also sought to eliminate other anti-Qing armed forces. It was not until 1665 that Sichuan Province came fully under Qing jurisdiction. However, the outbreak of the Three Feudatories Revolt, led by Wu Sangui in 1673, once again plunged Sichuan into a state of war. Peace was only restored in 1681 when the revolt was decisively suppressed, ushering in a prolonged period of stability. These years of warfare significantly depleted Sichuan's population.

In addition to war, natural disasters, epidemics, and even tiger attacks contributed to the dramatic population decline in Sichuan. Li Shigen's records highlight that, from 1609 onwards, Sichuan experienced frequent calamities. Droughts afflicted areas such as Anyue, Lezhi, Deyang, and Guangyuan, leading to reduced agricultural output. Many residents were forced to subsist on grass roots and tree bark, with widespread starvation resulting in numerous deaths (Li 2005, 287). Simultaneously, three different plagues further decimated the population. The depopulation also led to an increase in tiger attacks, as tigers ventured into abandoned cities and villages in search of food. Historical documents frequently recorded such incidents, illustrating the profound interconnectedness between human depopulation and wildlife intrusion.

Between 1644 and 1681, the prolonged conflicts, natural disasters, and epidemics culminated in a significant population decline across Sichuan Province. The loss of population rendered many county-level administrative divisions unsustainable, as they could no longer fulfil their functions. In response, the Qing central government, drawing upon the administrative divisions of the Ming Dynasty, implemented measures to reduce administrative costs and enhance efficiency by abolishing or merging county-level administrative divisions with sparse populations.

Simultaneously, the Qing central government introduced policies to repopulate Sichuan, including migration incentives and agricultural support. Following the restoration of peace in 1682, these policies proved remarkably effective, spurring rapid population growth in the region. The resulting increase in population imposed additional administrative demands on local governments. In response, local officials petitioned the central government to reinstate the county-level administrative divisions that had been abolished during the preceding decades. Recognising the necessity of these requests, the Qing central government supported the reorganisation of Sichuan's administrative framework between 1682 and 1735, focusing on reinstating and optimising county-level administrative divisions.

In addition to addressing demographic challenges, the Qing central government also reformed the administrative structure in Sichuan's border areas to address political instability. Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou, located in the southwestern region of the Qing Empire, were home to numerous ethnic minorities and characterised by complex political dynamics. Since the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the central government had relied on the *Tusi* system to indirectly govern these areas. This system involved appointing hereditary minority leaders, known as *Tusi*, who retained control over local governance while paying taxes or tribute to the central government. However, the autonomy afforded to the *Tusi* often led to internecine conflicts, territorial disputes, and rebellions, which destabilised the border regions.

Recognising the limitations of the *Tusi* system, the Qing central government sought to assert direct control over the southwestern border areas. Sichuan's geographical and strategic significance heightened the urgency of this initiative. Situated at the middle and upper reaches of the Yangtze River and surrounded by a basin, Sichuan possessed both defensive and offensive capabilities. A powerful and autonomous Sichuan posed a potential threat to the Qing central government's authority. To mitigate this risk, the central government aimed to weaken Sichuan's influence while balancing the power dynamics in the southwest by bolstering the strength of neighbouring provinces.

To achieve these objectives, the Qing central government abolished the *Tusi* system in the border areas of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou, bringing these territories under direct central administration. The provincial boundaries of these regions were subsequently redefined to enhance administrative efficiency and reduce the likelihood of rebellion. The new boundaries featured an "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" structure, fostering mutual oversight among the three provinces. This innovative arrangement enabled the provinces to monitor and

counterbalance one another, strengthening central control over the border region and reinforcing the Qing government's centralised authority.

The Qing central government's adjustments to Sichuan's administrative divisions during this period laid the groundwork for the region's current administrative structure. Notably, the provincial boundaries between Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou still reflect the "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" configuration. Understanding the rationale behind these adjustments provides valuable insights into how demographic and political factors shaped administrative policies. Furthermore, these reforms underscore the Qing central government's strategic intent to consolidate power through effective governance (Cao & Ku, 2024).

The Decrease in Population Has Led to the Change of County-Level Administrative Divisions

Between 1644 and 1681, the Qing central government abolished and merged numerous county-level administrative divisions, driven by a dramatic decline in Sichuan's population. Several factors contributed to this demographic collapse, including Zhang Xianzhong's uprising, military campaigns by the Qing central government to consolidate its power, and the Three Feudatories Revolt.

Sichuan's unique geographical features played a critical role in its historical and political significance. The province, characterised by a basin terrain surrounded by mountains, offered strong natural defences against foreign invasions. Its location in the middle and upper reaches of the Yangtze River further provided strategic advantages for both defence and offence. This combination of basin topography and riverine location endowed Sichuan with considerable political and military importance. Consequently, when Zhang Xianzhong initiated a peasant rebellion against the Ming central government in 1630, he and his generals recognised Sichuan as a vital stronghold for establishing their regime. According to the *Xian Zei Ji Shi Lue* (*The Story of Zhang Xianzhong*), controlling Sichuan served as a base for Zhang to launch further territorial expansions to the north (CTX).

In 1644, Zhang Xianzhong proclaimed the establishment of the Xi Dynasty in Chengdu, Sichuan, and began his rule. However, his administration was marked by extreme brutality. To consolidate the stability of his regime, Zhang employed draconian measures. The *Ming Shi* (*History of the Ming Dynasty*) describes him as a man with a murderous nature who took pleasure in killing, while his soldiers were rewarded based on the number of people they killed (Zhang et al., 1974, 7976). As Zhang's military operations faltered, his minister Wang Zhaolin suggested that they render Sichuan uninhabitable by massacring its population, destroying its cities, and leaving it in ruins. This would deter future regimes from easily occupying the region (CTX). Zhang approved this plan, leading to widespread slaughter and devastation. According to the French missionary Gourdon François-Marie-Joseph, Zhang's army massacred both people and livestock wherever they went, leaving behind burned homes and decimated forests, transforming Sichuan into a wasteland (Gourdon 1981, 30).

Although Zhang Xianzhong's uprising was ultimately suppressed by the Qing central government in 1647, his brutal rule is often regarded as one of the key factors contributing to Sichuan's depopulation during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. This catastrophic decline necessitated immediate administrative adjustments by the Qing central government to manage the depleted region.

However, Zhang Xianzhong cannot be solely blamed for the population decline. The demographic recovery did not occur even after his defeat. As Li Quanzhong analysed, the depopulation of Sichuan was also exacerbated by the actions of the Qing army, the army of the Nanming regime, and the subsequent Three Feudatories Revolt (Li 2009, 66). For instance, during their military campaigns in Sichuan, Qing soldiers reportedly killed civilians to secure

food supplies (Gourdon 1981, 119). Entire cities were annihilated under the pretext that soldiers could not distinguish between combatants and ordinary residents (Xiao 2006, 245). Similarly, the Three Feudatories Revolt further contributed to the devastation. General Tan Hong, serving under Wu Sangui, looted and pillaged the region, while his troops committed widespread atrocities (Li 1993, 53).

Between 1644 and 1681, Sichuan experienced uprisings for 25 of those 37 years. Chen Shisong estimated that these conflicts resulted in the deaths of between 3 and 4.8 million Sichuanese (Chen 2016, 295). This prolonged unrest was a significant factor in the province's population decline, prompting the Qing central government to respond by consolidating and reorganising administrative divisions to better manage the region.

Adding to these challenges, Sichuan faced a series of natural disasters starting in 1642. Severe droughts, such as those in Anyue and Lezhi, drastically reduced agricultural yields, forcing many residents to abandon the province. By 1646, droughts in Guang'an drove people to subsist on grass roots and tree bark, resulting in widespread starvation and death (Li 2005, 287). Additionally, records from the *Shubi (History of Sichuan during the Qing Dynasty)* indicate that three distinct plagues struck Sichuan simultaneously in 1647, further decimating the population (Peng 2002, 173). Following the destruction of villages and towns, tigers descended from the forests to occupy human settlements, attacking survivors and exacerbating the demographic crisis. Historical accounts even describe groups of tigers occupying government offices (Wang 1987, 59–60).

Cao Shuji's estimates reveal the extent of the devastation: by the end of this period, fewer than 5% of the original population survived in eastern Sichuan, about 15% in the north, and less than 10% in both the southern and western regions (Cao 1997, 77). According to the *Sichuan Tongzhi (History of Sichuan)*, the population of the entire province had dwindled to numbers comparable to those of a single county in other provinces (Huang 1986, 667).

The compounded effects of uprisings, droughts, plagues, and depopulation rendered many county-level administrative divisions unsustainable. In response, the Qing central government abolished or merged these divisions to save costs and improve efficiency. The demographic collapse of Sichuan not only reshaped its administrative structure but also highlighted the Qing government's need to adapt its governance strategies in response to unprecedented challenges.

Faced with a massive population decline and the extraordinary situation of administrative offices being occupied by tigers, the Qing central government responded by abolishing or merging county-level administrative divisions with small populations. Liu Yumo, an official in the Ministry of Ceremonies, proposed to the Shunzhi Emperor that administrative divisions in uninhabited areas should be abolished or merged initially and reinstated only when the population had sufficiently recovered (Shun 1985a, 522). This pragmatic approach was endorsed by the Shunzhi Emperor, reflecting the central government's commitment to maintaining administrative efficiency amidst a crisis.

In 1653, the Qing central government implemented this policy by abolishing Shehong County and placing its territory directly under the jurisdiction of the Tongchuan Zhili Independent Department. Similarly, Suining County was merged with Pengxi County (Yi 2016, 199). In 1659, Luojiang County and Zhangming County were also abolished, with their jurisdictions transferred to Deyang County and Mianzhou, respectively (Yi 2016, 197).

The process of administrative restructuring continued in subsequent years. In 1662, the Qing government abolished the counties of Dazu, Pengshan, Shuangliu, Anju, Tongliang, Dingyuan, Bishan, and Anyue. By 1667, Qing Shen and Weiyuan counties were similarly eliminated (Yi 2016, 198–199). In 1668, additional counties, including Peng, Chongning, Wulong, Xinning, Daning, and Yuechi, were abolished (Kang 1985a, 372; Yi 2016, 196). By

1670, the administrative changes extended to the abolition of Huayang County and Dachang County (Yi 2016, 198).

The archival records indicate that a total of 22 county-level administrative divisions in Sichuan Province were abolished or merged between 1644 and 1681. This figure represents 19.82% of the 111 county-level administrative divisions that existed at the end of the Ming Dynasty. Such a significant reduction underscores the severity of the population decline and the Qing government's necessity to optimise governance structures to cope with the diminished populace.

From 1644 to 1681, the severe demographic decline caused by uprisings, plagues, droughts, and other factors left many county-level administrative divisions unable to fulfil their responsibilities. This dire situation compelled the Qing central government to adopt a strategy of abolishing or amalgamating divisions with sparse populations. In other words, the administrative restructuring carried out during this period was directly shaped by the demographic crisis and exemplified the Qing government's adaptive response to governance challenges.

The Increase in Population Has Led to the Change of the County-Level Administrative Divisions

Between 1644 and 1681, Sichuan Province experienced a significant population decline due to uprisings, droughts, and plagues. However, in 1681, with the conclusion of the Three Feudatories Revolt, Sichuan entered a prolonged period of peace. This era of stability provided favourable living conditions that facilitated population growth and enabled the Qing central government's immigration policies to yield remarkable results. Consequently, after 1682, Sichuan's population grew rapidly, increasing the administrative workload for local governments. This prompted the Qing central government to reinstate many of the county-level administrative divisions that had been abolished between 1644 and 1681.

Efforts to rebuild Sichuan's population began during the conflict between the Qing central government and Zhang Xianzhong for control of the province. The Qing government implemented a preferential immigration policy, recognising the strategic importance of repopulating the region. These efforts garnered attention not only from the Qing emperors but also from local officials, including county magistrates and governors, who played key roles in promoting population restoration.

In 1646, Wang Zuntan, the governor of Sichuan, issued a notice urging Sichuanese who had fled the province to return (Chang and Yang 1984, 3564). This marked the Qing central government's initial attempt to repopulate Sichuan. However, the ongoing instability in the region deterred potential returnees, and Wang Zuntan's efforts were ultimately unsuccessful in increasing the population.

Despite this initial failure, the Qing central government and local officials in Sichuan remained resolute in their determination to restore the province's population. Recognising the challenges posed by the severe depopulation, they devised more targeted and preferential policies. For instance, Li Bingzhi, the magistrate of Qijiang County, used his own salary to cover relocation expenses for immigrants (Song 1992, 554). Similarly, as recorded in the *Kangxi Sichuan Zongzhi (General History of Sichuan)*, Governor Zhang Dedi proposed sending officials with organised horse-drawn carriages and funds to other provinces to encourage Sichuanese living outside the province to return (Cai 1673, 17). These initiatives reflected the proactive stance of the Qing government in addressing Sichuan's demographic crisis.

To accelerate the population recovery, the Qing central government expanded the scope of eligible immigrants and introduced additional incentives. For example, the government

allowed landless individuals or those without stable employment to migrate to Sichuan, covering their travel expenses and granting them ownership of reclaimed land (Zhang 1936, 1000). In 1671, the government further stipulated that immigrants reclaiming uncultivated land would be exempt from paying taxes for five years (Kang 1985b, 485). Such measures aimed to reduce the financial burden on new settlers and encourage migration to the region.

The Qing central government also implemented a system of rewards and punishments to ensure the success of its immigration policies. Local officials who demonstrated significant achievements in increasing Sichuan's population were rewarded with promotions. Conversely, officials who failed to effectively resettle immigrants or allowed reclaimed land to revert to wasteland faced penalties (Kang 1985a, 380). This approach incentivised local officials to actively support the central government's efforts to rebuild Sichuan's population and ensure the sustainability of the province's agricultural development.

In summary, the Qing central government adopted a multifaceted strategy to repopulate Sichuan following the devastation caused by uprisings, natural disasters, and plagues. By expanding the eligibility criteria for immigrants, lowering taxes, covering travel expenses, and incentivising local officials, the government successfully revitalised the province's population. These policies not only contributed to the rapid population growth after 1682 but also laid the foundation for the administrative and economic recovery of Sichuan.

Although Sichuan experienced uprisings for 28 years between 1644 and 1681, the Qing central government's efforts to repopulate the province during this period yielded limited success. However, following the conclusion of the Three Feudatories Revolt in 1681, Sichuan experienced substantial population growth. According to Wang Di's statistics, the population of Sichuan was only 633,000 in 1670. By 1685, it had increased to 987,000, and by 1724, it had risen dramatically to 2,983,000 (Wang 1989, 96). This remarkable increase can be attributed to the stable social environment after the cessation of conflict and the effectiveness of the Qing central government's immigration policies. As Sun Xiaofen noted, more than one million immigrants from over ten provinces migrated to Sichuan during the early Qing period (Sun 1997, 1–4). This demographic resurgence not only demonstrated the success of the Qing government's population rebuilding initiatives but also necessitated a reassessment of Sichuan's county-level administrative divisions to address the demands of the growing population.

John Fitzgerald underscores the fact that the county-level administrative division is the core unit of local governance (Fitzgerald 2001, 16). As Sichuan's population grew rapidly, the administrative workload for local governments increased correspondingly. To effectively manage the population and ensure efficient handling of administrative affairs, it became essential to restore and expand county-level administrative divisions. However, the influx of migrants also introduced challenges. According to the *Sichuan Tongzhi (History of Sichuan)*, some immigrants resorted to theft and looting, disrupting social stability (Huang 1986, 662). In this context, restoring abolished county-level administrative divisions became a necessary measure for the Qing central government to alleviate the administrative burden on local governments and maintain order.

Governor Xian De highlighted this issue when reporting to the Yongzheng Emperor. He noted that many county-level administrative divisions in Sichuan had previously been abolished due to population decline and reduced administrative demands. However, with the significant increase in population, he emphasised the need to restore these divisions to address the administrative challenges effectively (Yong 1985a, 162).

Between 1721 and 1734, the Qing central government undertook a systematic restoration of county-level administrative divisions in Sichuan. In 1721, Yuechi County and Tongliang County were reinstated (Kang 1985c, 846). Huayang County was restored in 1727 (Yong 1985b, 970). In 1729, the government reinstated the government reinstated the counties

of Shuangliu, Chongning, Peng, Luojiang, Zhangming, Bishan, Dazu, Dingyuan, Xinning, Anyue, Wei yuan, Qingshen, and Pengshan. (Yong 1985a, 162). Additionally, new counties such as Ya'an (Yong 1985c, 48), Qingxi (Yong 1985d, 201), Santai, and Leshan were established between 1729 and 1734 (Yong 1985e, 850). This concentrated restoration and establishment of counties during this period directly corresponded to the rapid population growth after 1682.

The Qing central government's adjustments to Sichuan's administrative divisions highlighted the interactive relationship between population dynamics and governance structures. The number and area of county-level administrative divisions were closely tied to population density. As Zhou Zhenhe observed, administrative boundaries were delineated based on area, but population density was also a critical factor. In densely populated regions, county-level administrative divisions tend to cover smaller areas, while in sparsely populated regions, they encompassed larger areas (Zhou 2014, 201). Thus, the restoration and expansion of Sichuan's county-level administrative divisions were directly influenced by the province's population growth.

In summary, the population resurgence in Sichuan following the stabilisation of its social environment after 1681 necessitated the reinstatement and reorganisation of county-level administrative divisions. This process reflected the Qing central government's adaptive approach to governance, ensuring effective administration in response to changing demographic realities.

Political Unrest Affects the Adjustment of Provincial Boundaries

The border region between the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou—encompassing areas such as Wumeng, Wusa, Dongchuan, Zunyi, and Zhenxiong—has historically been inhabited by ethnic minorities. Since the Yuan Dynasty, the central government governed these regions through the *Tusi* system, appointing ethnic minority leaders as *Tusi* to manage local affairs. The *Tusi* system allowed these leaders to hold hereditary positions with independent political and military power within their jurisdictions. In return, they were only required to pay tribute and taxes to the central government. This arrangement left the border areas outside the direct administrative control of the central government.

However, the autonomy granted to the *Tusi* created instability. Rivalries among different *Tusi* led to frequent conflicts over territory and wealth, while many *Tusi* disobeyed or even rebelled against the central government. These uprisings caused prolonged political turbulence in the border regions of the three provinces.

Although the Qing central government initially continued implementing the *Tusi* system to consolidate its rule in the early years of its establishment, the persistent unrest caused by *Tusi* rebellions became a significant destabilising factor in the southwest. To address the volatile situation, the Qing government abolished the *Tusi* system in the border areas and subsequently readjusted the provincial boundaries of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. This restructuring not only improved the administrative efficiency of local governments in the border region but also balanced the relative power of the three provinces. Most notably, the redefined provincial borders adopted an "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" pattern, which stabilised the political situation by fostering mutual oversight among the provinces.

In 1644, when the Qing central government was first established, Sichuan was under the control of Zhang Xianzhong's Xi Dynasty, while the Nanming regime-controlled Yunnan and Guizhou. While the Qing central government launched military campaigns to reclaim these regions, it simultaneously issued notices inviting the *Tusi* leaders to surrender. The government declared that it would recognise the legitimacy of the *Tusi* and allow them to retain their independent political and military authority within their jurisdictions, provided they submitted

to Qing rule (Shun 1985b, 330). This dual strategy of military action and conciliation enabled the Qing central government to defeat Zhang Xianzhong's regime in Sichuan by 1647 and gain control of Yunnan and Guizhou by 1659.

Despite these achievements, the border regions of Wumeng, Wusa, Dongchuan, Zunyi, and Zhenxiong remained under the direct administration of the *Tusi*, resulting in continued political turbulence. As Fang Yuemeng observed, the Qing government's management of these *Tusi*-controlled regions was chaotic. Lawlessness and defiance of central authority were widespread, and the government struggled to resolve these issues in the short term (Fang 2015, 19).

The unrest in these areas was rooted in the *Tusi* system itself. By granting *Tusi* independent political and military power, the system provided them with the resources necessary to assert their authority through force. Some *Tusi* ruled their jurisdictions with brutality, while others engaged in conflicts with neighbouring *Tusi*. Additionally, many openly opposed the Qing central government. For example, the *Tusi* of Wusa did not immediately submit to Qing authority after the government's establishment in 1644. Their submission came only in 1659, after the Qing had firmly established control over Yunnan and Guizhou. This delay in recognising Qing sovereignty demonstrated the resistance and non-compliance inherent in the *Tusi* system.

The *Tusi* of Wumeng frequently disregarded the law, engaging in looting expeditions in the Dongchuan area (Yong 1985f, 623). Similarly, the *Tusi* of Dongchuan committed acts of robbery in neighbouring regions, seizing the possessions of local residents (Eertai 1989, 11). Meanwhile, the *Tusi* of Zhenxiong formed alliances with *Tusi* from other regions to rebel against the Qing central government (Yong 1985g, 836). According to the *Qing Shizong Shilu* (*The Veritable Record of the Qing Progenitor Yongzheng Emperor*), many *Tusi* lacked understanding of national laws and imposed exorbitant taxes on the people under their jurisdiction. Furthermore, some *Tusi* confiscated horses, plundered the population, and created dire living conditions for the residents (Yong 1985h, 326). These accounts illustrate how the *Tusi*, who wielded a combination of political, economic, and military power, were only nominally subordinate to the central government. The Qing central government regarded the *Tusi* as a latent threat to political stability (Wu 2011, 90).

Recognising the political unrest caused by the *Tusi*, Eertai, the Governor of Yunnan, identified the governance of ethnic minorities and the implementation of the *Tusi* system as the foremost political challenge in Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. He argued that abolishing the *Tusi* system was essential for achieving a stable political environment and strengthening governance in the southwest region (Zhao 1977, 10230). Eertai's assessment proved accurate: only by bringing these regions under the direct control of the Qing central government could provincial borders be redrawn and local governance improved.

Between 1665 and 1727, the Qing central government capitalised on the internal conflicts among the *Tusi* to systematically eliminate them through military campaigns in the tri-province border region. The abolition of the *Tusi* system and the replacement of hereditary *Tusi* rulers with non-hereditary officials dispatched by the central government marked the centralisation of governance in these areas. These new officials were predominantly Han Chinese civil or military personnel selected from other provinces of the Qing Empire, rather than local elites, to ensure their loyalty to the central government and to break the entrenched local power structures maintained by the *Tusi*. Consequently, the Wumeng, Wusa, Dongchuan, Zhenxiong, and Zunyi regions were brought under the direct jurisdiction of the Qing central government, enabling adjustments to their administrative affiliations.

The governance of the Wumeng, Wusa, Dongchuan, Zhenxiong, and Zunyi areas, situated at the junction of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces, originally fell under Sichuan's jurisdiction. However, their considerable distance from the provincial capital,

Chengdu, posed significant challenges for effective management. For example, Wusa was approximately 600 kilometres from Chengdu, while Dongchuan was about 650 kilometres away. During an era when horses were the primary means of transportation, local officials faced significant logistical difficulties in travelling to Chengdu to fulfil administrative duties. This reduced the efficiency of governance by both the Qing central government and Sichuan Province. Conversely, Wusa was only 300 kilometres from Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou Province, and Dongchuan was a mere 220 kilometres from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. Reassigning these areas to closer provincial capitals was a logical solution to improve administrative efficiency. As Madeleine Zelin summarised, Sichuan's inability to effectively manage these regions necessitated the redrawing of its borders with Yunnan Province (Zelin 2008, 224). Similarly, Zunyi, located 500 kilometres from Chengdu but only 140 kilometres from Guiyang, was more effectively governed by Guizhou Province than by Sichuan.

To eliminate the political turmoil caused by *Tusi* rebellions and enhance governance efficiency, the Qing central government undertook a series of administrative adjustments. In 1666, Wusa was incorporated into Guizhou Province. In 1726 and 1727, Dongchuan, Zhenxiong, and Wumeng were transferred to Yunnan Province. Finally, in 1728, Zunyi was reassigned to Guizhou Province. These changes reshaped the provincial boundaries of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou, creating a distinctive "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" pattern, which is illustrated in Map 1.

Map 1: The Administrative Divisions of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou Provinces After the Adjustment of the Provincial Boundaries in 1728



Source: Adapted from Chen Yao, "Wumen Town, Zhenxiong, and the Change of Administrative Division in Southwest China in the Early Qing Dynasty 乌蒙镇雄出川入滇与清初西南行政区划变迁." *Journal of Zhaotong University* 42 (1): 19.

The phrase "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" refers to irregular, intertwined, or embedded borders, resembling a staggered arrangement of canine teeth. This configuration is particularly effective in maintaining stability in border areas. For instance, if a rebellion occurred in the Wusa region of Guizhou, neighbouring regions such as Dongchuan and Zhenxiong in Yunnan could rapidly deploy troops to encircle Wusa. Similarly, if an uprising took place in Zhenxiong in Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou could swiftly intervene. Thus, the newly established "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" provincial boundaries reshaped the

political and military dynamics of the tri-province border region, enabling tighter control over these areas and reducing the likelihood of insurgencies.

Furthermore, the adjustment of administrative divisions in these regions shortened the distance to provincial capitals, significantly enhancing the management efficiency of local governments. After the Qing central government reassigned Wusa, Zunyi, Wumeng, Zhenxiong, and Dongchuan from Sichuan to Guizhou and Yunnan, the distance between these border areas and their new provincial capitals decreased considerably. For example, the incorporation of Wusa into Guizhou reduced its distance from the provincial capital by 300 kilometres, while Dongchuan's incorporation into Yunnan shortened its distance by 430 kilometres. These adjustments not only expedited the transmission of government orders but also mitigated the administrative challenges arising from the remoteness of these regions under Sichuan's jurisdiction.

The reassignment of Zunyi to Guizhou also enhanced the overall strength of Guizhou Province while weakening Sichuan's influence. This rebalancing of power among the provinces was instrumental in maintaining the Qing central government's control over the region. Historically, Guizhou's financial and logistical resources were limited, requiring the transport of grain and other supplies from Sichuan and Huguang to sustain the province. As Gu Zuyu observed, even the military pay for Guizhou was supplied by Sichuan and Huguang (Gu 2005, 5243).

Zunyi, however, possessed both agricultural and commercial advantages. Renowned for its high-quality tea production, Zunyi was a vital hub for tea cultivation and trade. According to the *Zunyi Prefecture Records*, the region's tea trade was particularly prosperous, bolstered by its strategic location as a critical transit point between Guizhou and Sichuan (He 2003, 228). By incorporating Zunyi into Guizhou Province, the Qing central government endowed Guizhou with access to Zunyi's rich natural resources and superior transportation networks, significantly enhancing the province's comprehensive strength. Simultaneously, this reallocation weakened Sichuan's power, preventing it from becoming a politically and militarily independent region that could potentially threaten the central government.

In conclusion, the turbulence caused by *Tusi* rebellions underscored the necessity and urgency of abolishing the *Tusi* system. While the abolition of the *Tusi* system and the redrawing of provincial borders in Sichuan were pivotal in consolidating Qing authority, they also exemplify the broader imperial strategy of centralisation. Similar initiatives, particularly the policy of *gaitu guiliu* (transforming native chieftaincies into standard bureaucratic jurisdictions), were enacted in other frontier areas such as Guizhou, Guangxi, and Hunan. However, the intensity and configuration of these reforms were uniquely pronounced in Sichuan due to its acute political volatility, demographic instability, and geographic remoteness. The "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" structure thus reflects a region-specific innovation within a wider framework of empire-wide governance reform. Following its abolition, the Qing central government's adjustments to the provincial boundaries of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou considered both the administrative capacity of the provinces and the need for regional stability. The new "Interlocking Like Canine Teeth" boundaries not only facilitated effective governance of the border areas but also strengthened centralised authority. Thus, the redrawing of Sichuan's provincial boundaries was directly influenced by political unrest and strategically designed to consolidate the Qing central government's power.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the examination of Sichuan's population and political dynamics between 1644 and 1735 sheds light on the reasons behind the Qing central government's adjustments to county-level administrative divisions and provincial boundaries in the region during this

period. This study highlights that these adjustments were primarily influenced by changes in population size and the prevailing political conditions.

Between 1644 and 1681, the combined impact of uprisings, droughts, and epidemics led to a significant decline in Sichuan's population. In response, the Qing central government abolished and merged county-level administrative divisions with sparse populations to reduce administrative expenditures and optimise governance. However, after 1682, Sichuan entered a prolonged period of peace. The implementation of the Qing central government's immigration policies achieved remarkable success, resulting in rapid population growth. This demographic resurgence increased the administrative burden on local governments, prompting the Qing central government to restore previously abolished county-level divisions to manage the growing population effectively.

Simultaneously, political unrest in the border areas of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou necessitated further administrative adjustments. The Qing central government abolished the *Tusi* system, which had contributed to instability in these regions, and redefined the provincial boundaries of the three provinces. These changes enhanced local governments' capacity to manage the border areas and reinforced centralised authority.

In essence, this study demonstrates that the Qing central government employed administrative restructuring as a critical tool to adapt to demographic pressures and political instability in Sichuan and its border provinces. The deliberate abolition, reinstatement, and redefinition of administrative divisions, particularly county-level units and provincial boundaries, served not only to manage shifting population densities but also to mitigate unrest and consolidate imperial authority. These findings underscore the Qing state's strategic use of administrative governance as a mechanism for maintaining long-term political stability and highlight the dynamic relationship between population trends, regional unrest, and centralised statecraft in early modern China.

Beyond its historical significance, this study also suggests that the Qing central government's strategies for adjusting administrative boundaries offer valuable lessons for contemporary governance. By reconstructing the factors that motivated past administrative reforms, this research highlights the importance of responsive and adaptive governance structures in addressing changing demographic and political landscapes. The Qing experience provides a historical reference point for modern policymakers facing similar challenges of population shifts, regional instability, and the need for efficient state administration.

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