SILK ROADS AND WOOL ROUTES:

THE SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF TIBETAN TRADE

by

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Abstract

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Based on fieldwork in Lhasa, Tibet, Kalimpong, India, and Kathmandu, Nepal, this dissertation examines the past sixty years of social and economic changes along a trade route that cuts across China, India, and Nepal. Centered on the narratives of two generations of traders who have exchanged goods such as sheep wool (and now, household appliances) across Himalayan borders, the project investigates how infrastructural and political transformations on global and regional levels might be experienced through smaller scale, "everyday" sites of trading activity. By exploring the intersections between economic anthropology, human geography, and material culture, I address a fundamental question: how might we make connections between aspects of seemingly mundane daily life and the more abstract level of global change? Taking an approach that explores how traders "make places," this project examines the creation of geographies of trade that work against state notions of what the trade route *should* look like. These tensions between the apparent fixity of national boundaries and the mobility of local individuals around such restrictions are, I argue, precisely how routes and histories of trade are produced.

Several recent state-led infrastructural development projects – such as the reopening of the Nathu-la mountain pass between Sikkim and Tibet and the completion of the Beijing-Lhasa railroad in 2006 – have been driven by the need to open up new markets for surplus commodities in the name of "free" trade and bilateral cooperation. In an area of Asia that has long been characterized by geographical representations highlighting its supposed marginality and remoteness, these state-led searches for new openings for capital have led to the creation of what I call "geographical blindspots," the erasure or obfuscation of certain places in tandem with the highlighting of other, more profitable places for a variety of hegemonic political and economic goals. This dissertation examines how competing groups are attempting to make their trading places more coherent in the face of such powerful economic shifts, arguing for the need to obtain a more nuanced picture of the tensions and overlaps between large-scale economic shifts and smaller-scale practices in the region.

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It seems unfair that dissertations should be considered the product of a single individual. In this case, nothing could be farther from the truth. I doubt I would have been able to complete this project without the support, co-operation, camaraderie, and expertise of numerous individuals and institutions. I would like to extend the most gratitude to those whom I could not name for sensitive reasons.

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A Note on Transliteration and Translation

Tibetan (Tib.), Chinese (Cn.), Nepali (Nep.), and English were the main languages used in this project. Newari (also called Newah or Nepalbhasa), Hindi, and Marwari terms were also used but are not quoted in this text. For Chinese words, I have used the standardized pinyin system for terms such as *hukou* (household registration system), but use English phoneticizations without italics for more commonly used words such as Beijing. Similarly, for Tibetan, I have used the Wylie transliteration model for words such as *kha btags* (ceremonial scarves), but use English phoneticizations without italics for words such as the Barkor (the central marketplace and pilgrimage circuit in Lhasa), or yak. Interviews in Tibet were conducted in Tibetan, unless otherwise indicated. Interviews in India and Nepal were conducted in English, unless otherwise indicated.

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Introduction

Geographical Blindspots: Tibet, Trade, and Territory

…You do not come to Euphemia only to buy and sell, but also because at night, by the fires all around the market, seated on sacks or barrels or stretched out on piles of carpets, at each word that one man says-such as "wolf," "sister," "hidden treasure," "battle," "scabies," "lovers"-the others tell, each one, his tale of wolves, sisters, treasures, scabies, lovers, battles. And you know that in the long journey ahead of you, when to keep awake against the camel's swaying or the junk's rocking, you start summoning up your memories one by one, your wolf will have become another wolf, your sister a different sister, your battle other battles, on your return from Euphemia, the city where memory is traded at every solstice and at every equinox.[1]

The temporal rhythms of cities are marked not just by seasonal changes, but also by variations in trading practices. In the transition from autumn to winter in Lhasa, the tourists who buy trinkets from the marketplace vendors that are common in the height of summer begin to peter out until they are almost completely absent. The luxury hotels grow quiet. There is a momentary pause, and soon nomads from rural Amdo and Kham – other Tibetan-speaking regions – begin to appear in the streets for trade and for pilgrimage, bartering wool for yak meat, and purchasing household items like blenders and blankets.

It is during one of these transitional moments, right before the city plunges into a deep winter – bitterly cold at night but clear and sunny during the day – that I begin my year of fieldwork. I am sitting indoors with Lobsang, an older man in his 70s who traded

[1] Calvino, Italo. 1978. "Trading Cities," *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harvest, pp. 36.

Tibetan wool and Indian foodstuffs between Lhasa and Kalimpong in the 1950s.[2] The house is dark and comfortable, and he seems relaxed talking about the past, even in the tense political atmosphere in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China. The interview is going well. Lobsang remembers quite a bit about his life, and I take notes on the kinds of items traded, names for old kinds of measurements, and the towns he passed through with his mule caravan. Towards the end of our discussion, I glance at my list of interview questions and ask him if he could draw me a map of what he remembers of his journey from Lhasa to Kalimpong. He looks at me, puzzled.

"I can't do it."

"It's ok." I hand him a piece of paper, and try to reassure him that it really doesn't matter what the map looks like. I tell him that he doesn't have to know how to draw a map, just how he got from place to place, and any landmarks he remembers.

He looks uncomfortable.

"It won't be correct."

A Tibetan friend who is sitting with us tells me quietly in English that it's probably because he didn't go to school, because he never learned how to make a proper map. "But that's the point," I say. "It won't be a *proper* map." I say that it will represent the traders' alternative representations of the region, or something like that. Confusion abounds. Lobsang shakes his head.

"I can't do it."

[2] Due to the politically sensitive nature of conducting research in Tibet, I have changed the names and many identifying characteristics of everyone in this dissertation. Although some individuals said they did not mind me using their real names, I have still given everyone pseudonyms for the sake of consistency.

It is clear that I have made him embarrassed. My face feels hot. I quickly switch the subject.

Asking traders to draw cognitive or mental maps was a major part of the original methodology section in my dissertation proposal. This was (or so I thought) going to be a unusual contribution to the field of anthropology; in addition to the commonly used social scientific methodologies such as participant observation, snowball sampling and semi-structured interviews, I planned to ask traders to provide rough drawings of their trade journeys, and I would show how their spatial representations of the trade route differed from "real" cartographic maps. After all, Barbara Aziz, one of the earliest anthropologists to research Tibetan socio-economic issues, did the same with villagers from Tingri, central Tibet, in the 1970s. She asked traders to draw how they viewed the region, and they ended up drawing egocentric maps depicting important economic hubs at the center, "spontaneously without any familiarity with modern mapping" (Aziz 1975: 32). Inspired by Aziz, I envisioned that my project would be an updated version of her efforts. By asking members of two generations of traders to draw such maps, I thought that I could demonstrate how peoples' spatial conceptions of trade journeys between Lhasa and Kalimpong have altered over time in relation to major changes in Sino-Indian infrastructure.

However, later, it seemed to me that Lobsang's worry that his drawing would not fit in with what hegemonic maps *should* look like was perhaps more significant than any actual drawing of an "alternative" map, for only certain people use maps in the first place. In some cases, the creation of other kinds of maps can be useful. For instance, in a scene in *My Winnipeg*, filmmaker Guy Maddin's black and white "docu-fantasy" of his

return to his wintry Canadian hometown, Maddin tells us that there are two competing taxi companies that work the streets of Winnipeg. One uses the visible front lanes to get around. But, because the streets are so snowy and unmanageable in the winter, a rival taxi company takes passengers along the unnamed back lanes of the town. Although no one talks about the alternative route in public, everybody in the town knows about it. The image we see in the film to accompany the narration is that of two street maps; one superimposed on top of the other. At some nodes they are at odds, at other places they overlap and become blurry, but together they form the shape of the town. I refer to this scene in the film because I wish to stress the importance of looking simultaneously at different ways of making or producing places: those that are hegemonic (e.g., cartographic maps), along with other practices that might overlap or bump up against these more seemingly powerful representations of place (e.g., the alternative, unspoken taxi route, or perhaps more interestingly, Lobsang's hesitation in making the map).

Attention paid to a certain place or route (or one representation of a place or route) for hegemonic political and economic goals often results in the erasure or obfuscation of other places; what I would like to call a "geographical blindspot." I follow Henri Lefebvre's concept of the "blind field" in *The Urban Revolution* (which will be addressed later), but prefer to use the term "blindspots." The reason for this is rather simple: similar to the blindspots that are produced while driving in a car, places or activities that occur in a blindspot are actually always there. We are just unable to see them at a particular moment, until they pop back up in a different historical context. Because the production of a geographical blindspot – by the state, by groups who wish to reap economic profits, or by people simply going about their daily lives – brings some

places into view in favor of others, the analogy provides an approach for examining both the creation of favored places as well as those that are obscured. Throughout this study, I elaborate on this notion of the "geographical blindspot" with specific examples from my fieldwork in Lhasa, Kalimpong, and Kathmandu; asking how such blindspots are created, by whom, and for what reasons.

The trade route from Lhasa, Tibet, to Kalimpong, India, cuts across a section of the eastern Himalayas that has been characterized by colossal economic and political shifts over the past five or six decades. Through the stories of two generations of traders who have exchanged goods ranging from yak tails in the past to rice cookers and furniture now, I focus on the social, spatial, and economic transformation of the route, bringing together narratives of people, places, and things in an attempt to connect "everyday" trading experiences with larger-scale economic processes in this region of Asia and the world. I ask how we might make connections between aspects of seemingly mundane daily life and the more abstract level of global economic change. Taking an approach that explores how traders "make places," this research examines the creation of geographies of trade that often work against state notions of what the trade route should look like. These tensions between the apparent fixity of national and other boundaries and the mobility of local individuals around such restrictions are, I argue, exactly how routes and histories of trade are produced. I believe that overlaying the realities of individuals' daily trading practices with macro theories of national and global power is needed in order to understand long-term patterns in global capitalism as well as the recent economic rise of China and India.

Those who have found that their towns or trading activities have become "geographical blindspots" as a result of large-scale economic shifts often attempt to make their trading places more coherent or more visible in the face of such powerful shifts. These tensions between mobility and fixity exist at every geographical level, from the nation-state in its attempt to curb immigration and petty trade in the name of "national security," to the trader who is restricted from carrying flour across one border crossing and moves to another; every scale generates its own dynamic histories of moving and fixing. By looking at trading practices that cross the boundaries of nation-states and ethnic groups, this dissertation argues against binary "top-down versus bottom-up," "global versus local," or "formal versus informal" models of hegemony and resistance, where each is characterized by a certain kind of strategy (such as large scale powerful domination versus small scale resistance), in order to obtain a more nuanced picture of the tensions and overlaps between large-scale economic shifts and smaller-scale practices in the region. This is ultimately a story about the collaborative and competing social practices that make a trade route a route, and a region a region.

Shifting Economic Geographies

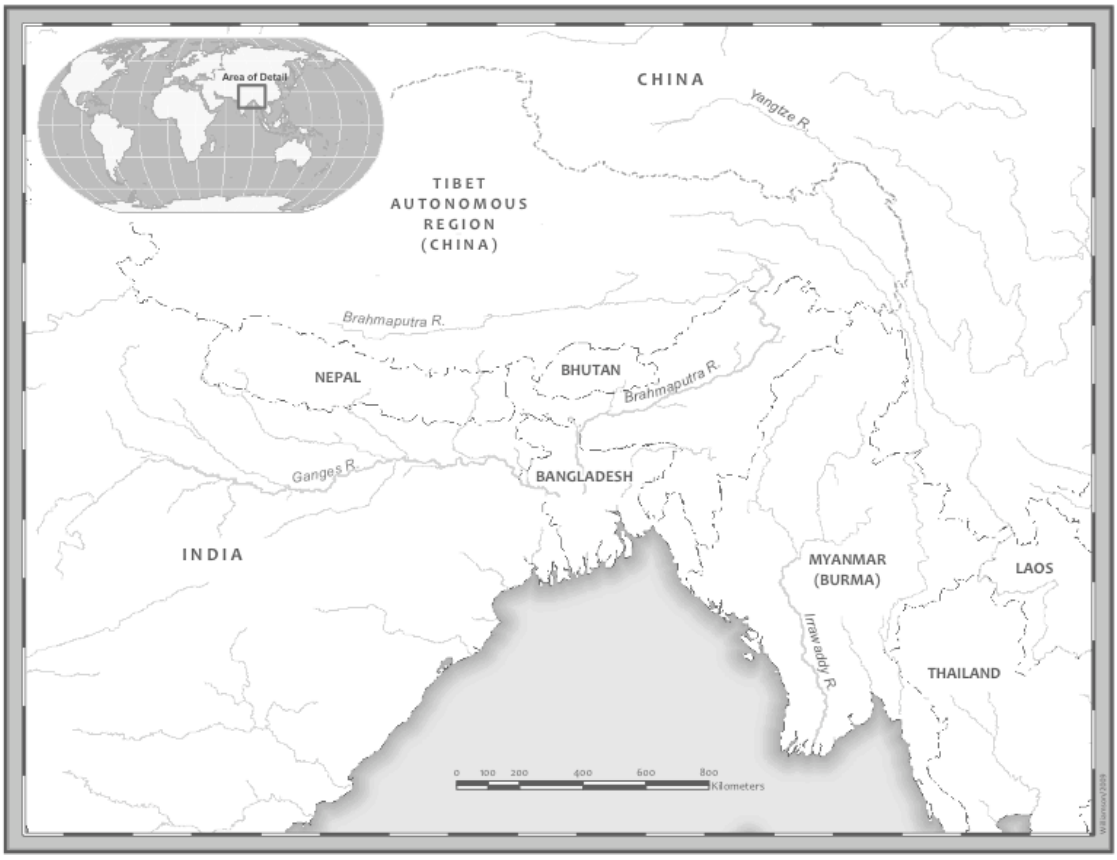


Figure 1. The eastern Himalayan region

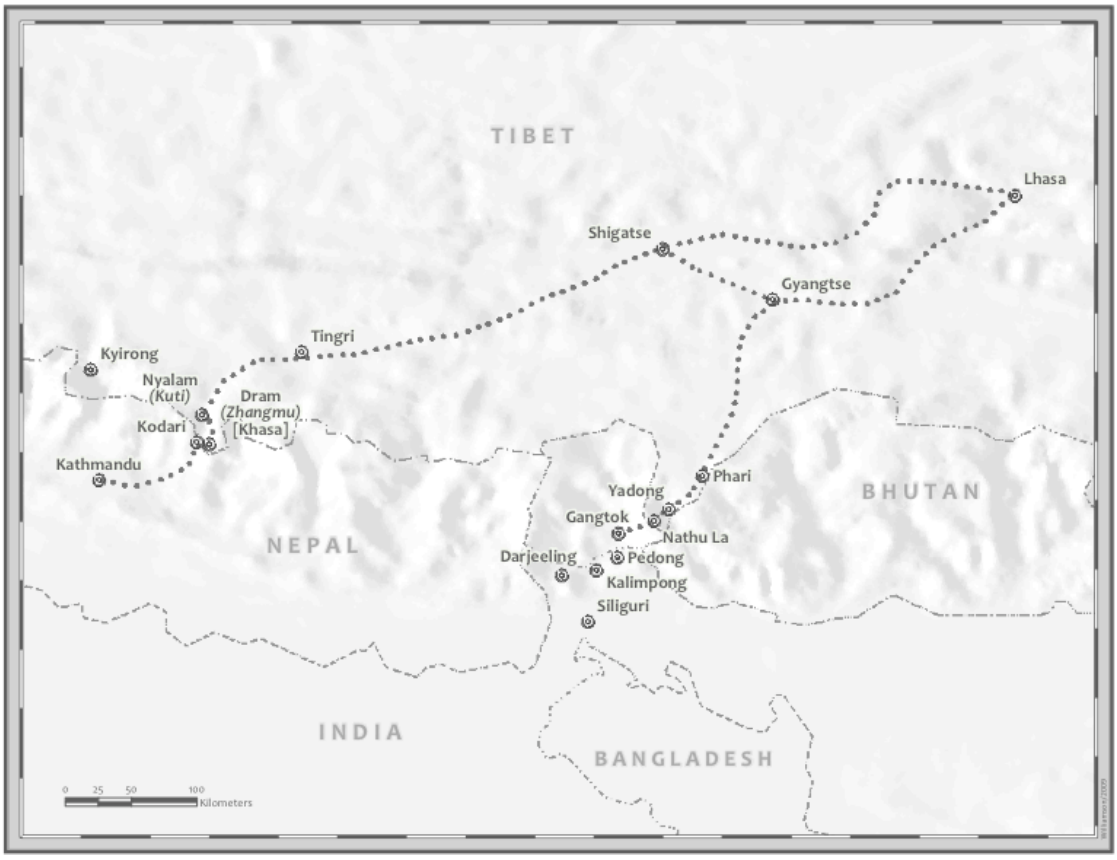


Figure 2. Two of the routes currently used for trade, with names of towns

In contrast to early Western cartographers' imaginings of Tibet as an inaccessible "blank" on the map between China and India – one to be filled in by explorers – a web of extensive trade and pilgrimage routes have cut across the Himalayan region since at least the seventh century CE (Bishop 1989: 75; Madan 2004). Asian travelers, politicians, traders, and religious figures recorded detailed descriptions of the commodities that Tibet had to offer; the region was particularly known for its musk, furs, wool, borax, and gold (Boulnois 2003: 133-56; Klimburg 1982: 25-37; Schafer 1985). The Barkor, the name of the central pilgrimage circuit around the holiest temple in Lhasa, was (and still is, to an extent) the bustling site of exchange for a variety of goods – chunks of lapis from

Afghanistan, raisins from Khotan, brick tea from Sichuan, and cotton from India – which stand as material indicators of the long-standing economic connections between Lhasa and other parts of Asia.



Figure 3. The Barkor in Lhasa, with shops and vendor stalls, 2002

Although nearly all of these trade routes between Tibet and other parts of Asia have been established, cut off, and reestablished over the centuries as a result of wars or economic necessity, this story mainly concerns the Lhasa-Kalimpong route and some of its further-reaching geographical links, including cities like Calcutta, Guangzhou, and

Bangkok.[3] The expansion of capital networks in tandem with designs on territory is a common thread throughout the history of the region. We begin in the late 1800s when claims on Tibet were partly a result of the desire for new markets in the wake of the economic decline of the East India Company, and partly the result of an interest in strategic expansion; in effect, the British hoped their goods could be introduced to China through the "back door" of Tibet.[4] The 1903-4 invasion of Tibet led by the British Commissioner to Tibet, Francis Younghusband, resulted in a number of events that reconfigured the landscape: the "opening" of the Chumbi Valley between Sikkim and Tibet for trade (despite the fact that small-scale trade had continued over those very mountain ranges for centuries), numerous road-building enterprises, and the establishment of "trade agencies" in Gyantse, Yatung (Tib., *gro mo*), and Lhasa. These institutions, ostensibly set up to manage commerce in the region, were essentially created and maintained to prevent the possibility of Russian, Chinese (and later, Japanese), encroachment on British Indian territory.

[3] The city of Calcutta was renamed Kolkata in 2001, partly in order to deemphasize British influence and to highlight its Bengali identity. The naming and renaming of places is another example of "fixing" certain kinds of territory against others.

[4] For a good description of British economic interests in Tibet, see Schuyler Cammann, *Trade Through the Himalayas: The Early British Attempts to Open Tibet* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970).

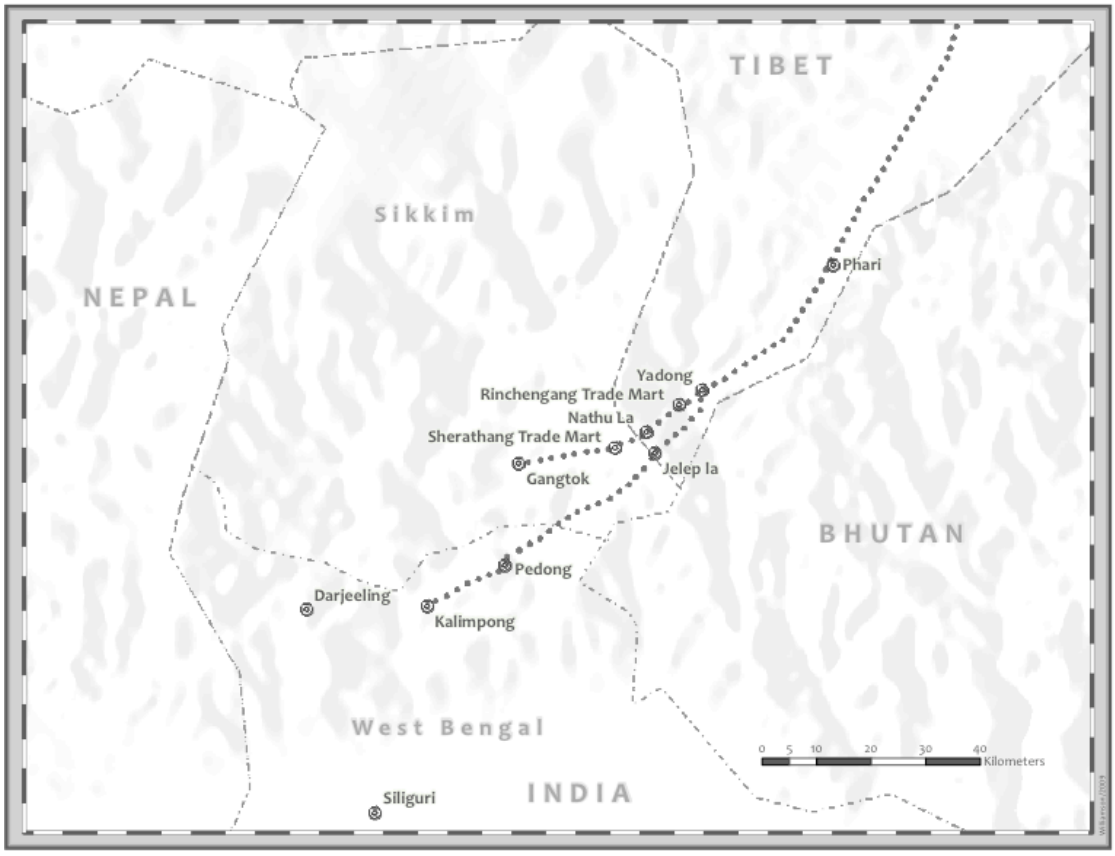


Figure 4. Location of Nathu-la and Jelep-la

With the Chumbi Valley controlled by the British, the Jelep-la mountain pass on the border of Tibet and Sikkim was opened, linking Lhasa, Gyantse, and Phari (see Figure 4) with Kalimpong. Roads were also built up to the Nathu-la pass (the route that linked Lhasa with Gangtok), which at the time did not see as much traffic as Jelep-la, due to its more treacherous topography. Before long, Kalimpong, originally a small town marked by local trade with Bhutan and Tibet, grew rapidly; it soon became a major center for British-run missionary schools and colonial holidaygoers. Meanwhile, the Kathmandu-Lhasa trade routes through Kodari and Kuti (see Figure 2) were cut off,

being superceded by the shorter route through Jelep-la. As a result, many merchants and traders from Nepal also settled in Kalimpong, along with Chinese refugees from Tibet.

By the mid-twentieth century, Kalimpong had become one of the most important towns in the region for the exchange of commodities; in particular, it was the main center for the sorting and processing of Tibetan wool. The wool was brought to Lhasa from Ngari or Changthang in western and northern Tibet by nomads or middlemen, where it would then be baled for transport and loaded on mule caravans, led almost exclusively by Tibetan or Newar (a Buddhist ethnic group from Kathmandu) men, indicative of a gendered division of labor in trade. Men tended to be mobile, leading the mule caravans from town to town between Lhasa and Kalimpong, whereas women would often stay behind, managing the shops or stalls, and occasionally the finances. Gendered divisions in trade are generally subject to spatial tensions between mobility and fixity; in order for the muleteers and wool to move, there had to be a foundation from which this mobility could be based.

The caravans would make the approximately 1-month-long journey in stages, stopping in Gyantse, Phari, and Yatung, traversing Jelep-la, and eventually ending up in Kalimpong. Here the wool would be weighed, sorted, and stored in large godowns (warehouses) for transport to the port of Calcutta. The mules would return to Lhasa laden with Indian grains, household implements, cotton garments, and even Rolex watches. Due to growing international demand, wool prices were at their peak in the 1940s. During the period from April 1, 1946 to March 31, 1947, the export of wool from Tibet to Kalimpong amounted to 106,615 maunds (approximately 8,742,430 pounds), at 55 rupees per maund (then about US$1,766,212!). At this time, the three largest trading families in

Tibet – Pangdatsang, Sadhutsang, and Reting – held a monopoly over the wool trade, while some smaller-scale traders did not fare as well.[5] According to one man who lived in Lhasa during the 1940s and 1950s, the economic connections between Kalimpong and Tibet were so important to the local geographical imagination that many Tibetans would use the word "Kalimpong" to refer to India as a whole.



Figure 5. Mule caravan loaded with wool, Kalimpong, 1930s (photograph taken by KC Pyne, courtesy of Kodak Stores, Kalimpong)

After the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) occupied Tibet in 1950, the trade in wool began to decline considerably. Tsering Shakya has noted that by the 1950s, 70 percent of trade between Tibet and India was effectively bought out by the Chinese

[5] In 1945, for example, "the petty traders could not hold their wool for various reasons and they had to dispose of their wool to the big traders at comparatively low prices." Annual Report of the British Trade Agency, Yatung, Tibet, for the year ending 31st March 1945.

State Trading Company, cutting off the businesses of long-established Newar and Marwari traders (business families originally from Rajasthan) in Lhasa (Shakya 1999: 115). At the same time, however, the presence of the Chinese army in Tibet ended up as a boon for some traders, who quickly switched from selling wool to selling more lucrative commodities that were in demand by the soldiers, such as batteries and petrol. However, in 1962, boundary disputes and the Sino-Indian War resulted in the sealing-off of the border passes between China and India.[6] Trade along the Lhasa-Kalimpong routes was almost completely cut off, significantly transforming the economic geography of the region.

Many traders, some of whom were given only 24 hours' notice to vacate their shops in the border marts, shifted their businesses by settling in Kathmandu and rerouting their trading links with Tibet through Nepal. Since the Newars were originally from Kathmandu, it was slightly easier for some of these families to constitute these trading links. This was the next-closest (officially) open route to Lhasa, which passed from Kathmandu through the border checkpoint at Kodari on the Nepal side, then through Dram (Khasa in Nepali and Zhangmu in Chinese) in Tibet, and on through Gyantse to Lhasa (see Figure 2). By 1965, a paved road between Kathmandu and Kodari – as well as the Friendship Bridge linking Nepal and China – became fully operational, transforming the Kathmandu-Lhasa route into the main route for Nepal-Tibet overland trade (and later, tourism).

[6] Although I do not address the lengthy and complex historical background of Sino-Indian border conflicts in this study, the main areas of contention that led up to the 1962 war were disputes over the Aksai Chin territory between Ladakh, Tibet, and Xinjiang, and the McMahon Line between Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet. It is worthy to note that as Indian boundary lines were drawn up by the British in the late nineteenth century, several "no-man's land" areas – although checkered by small villages and inhabited by numerous tribes – were drawn on maps at the last minute and left "open to modification" (Maxwell 1970:61).

After the start of Deng Xiaoping's reforms in 1978, state control over trade in Tibet began to diminish, and the subsequent growth of China and India as major economic powers led to renewed Sino-Indian trade negotiations in the 1990s and early 2000s.[7] In 2003, concurrent with rapid increases in development in both China and India, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Beijing and signed a declaration with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to expand border trade at Nathu-la. This document, while emphasizing the opening of Sino-Indian borders for the "free" movement of commodities, was simultaneously an agreement where India accepted the Tibet Autonomous Region as an integral, bounded part of the People's Republic of China. Whether or not the signing of this document meant that China implicitly accepted Sikkim as a part of India remains debatable (Sikkim went from a protectorate to a state of India in 1975).

This research, conducted between 2005 and 2007, took place at a time when major state-led development projects in Tibet and other western regions of China, such as the Qinghai-Tibet railway, were well underway or completed. In 2006, amidst much fanfare, the Nathu-la pass between India and Tibet reopened for trade. At the time of research, many traders, most of whom are children or grandchildren of former Kalimpong-Lhasa traders from the 1940s and 1950s, were actively looking for opportunities to sell inexpensive and profitable Chinese goods directly through southwestern port cities like Guangzhou and the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of Shenzhen, which had quickly become major national and global manufacturing sites by

[7] In 2001, the population of Kalimpong was approximately 43,000, and the population of Kathmandu 1,081,845. The figures for urban Lhasa were about 180,000 in 2000, although this number is likely very low, as it does not take into account numerous migrant workers from other parts of China as well as army members.

the mid-2000s. At the same time, other traders who sold local Indian, Tibetan, or Nepali products or commodities found themselves struggling to compete. It is against this backdrop of significant social, economic, and geographical changes that the story here unfolds.

I present this cursory historical-geographical outline of the shifts in trade between Lhasa and Kalimpong for two related reasons: first, to give readers a basic sense of the seismic political and economic shifts in the region over a period of approximately sixty years; and second, to demonstrate that tensions between mobility and fixity and the creation of blindspots on numerous geographical scales have been common features over the course of the economic history of the region. For instance, the road that was built by the British in order to facilitate the movement of goods and people through the Chumbi Valley in 1904 simultaneously cut off trade routes in other parts of the region; when the wool trade declined and the border between Sikkim and Tibet closed in 1962, traders turned to more profitable commodities and moved their businesses to more lucrative locations. It is through these actions that we can begin to see how the region and representations of the region have been produced and understood by competing groups today; past events tied to the landscape play a part in the creation of the region, not only "on the ground," so to speak, but also in the contemporary geographical imagination.

Territory is never stationary, and yet competing groups will often attempt to make the land more visible or coherent if it becomes threatened or occluded. Certain kinds of images or representations of the history of the region can be reshaped by the creation or recalling of alternative histories of space. For instance, when a number of elderly traders talk about the "golden era of Lhasa-Kalimpong trade," their narratives contribute to the

making of a particular representation of the region, located in a very specific time and place. Memories of the trade route as part of the "golden era" of the early twentieth century are directly set against how the present or the future state of the economy is perceived; in this case, traders worry that the recent influx of inexpensive Chinese commodities will effectively outsell locally made goods such as incense.

Cartographic Anxiety

The scene with Lobsang at the beginning of this introduction was not something I thought too much about during fieldwork (it hardly even made it as an entry in my fieldnotes), but it began bothering me when I first started to put this project together. One of the questions that kept recurring was "Just why couldn't Lobsang make the map?" There is, of course, no "correct" answer. Part of it may have to do with the fact that he was worried about surveillance; border regions are sensitive, and talking about the geography of the area or making maps is something that only officials or authorities do. The TAR is not an easy place for cultivating the high level of mutual trust that is helpful in ethnographic research; perhaps he was worried that he could get into trouble with the authorities by talking about the area in detail to a foreigner.[8] Or perhaps my friend was right; given my position as a scholar, he could have felt that I was quizzing him, exposing some kind of ignorance. Maybe he simply didn't want to do it. But if we take Lobsang's reaction at face value, perhaps there is another, more obvious answer: the map won't be correct, because it simply *isn't* correct. In other words, the abstractness of any cartographic map – or indeed any visual representation of Lobsang's trade journey – will

[8] For further details on research methods, including the sensitivity of research in the TAR and languages used, see Appendix A.

never match up with the actual lived experience of trading. As Neil Smith has written, "consciousness of space is a direct efflux of practical activity"; hence the gap between practical physical activity and the cartographic representation of abstract "space in general" is enormous and laden with power imbalances (Smith 2008: 96). Finding out how we can connect the narratives of practical trading experiences to more abstract large-scale economic and geographical shifts is one of the main aims of this dissertation.

"Trade route" in the singular is a misnomer. It is not, as we might imagine it, one unbroken line on a map leading from Town A to Town B. In the everyday experience of trading goods from one town to another, there is never a single, smooth path. There are blizzards and detours; there are different tributaries that branch off; there are temporal pauses when a trader must stay in one town for three months or more; there are invasive passport checks; there are multiple stops, starts, and diversions. Money may travel in one direction, people in another, and goods in yet another. Town A and Town B, therefore, do not stand isolated on their own, but are recognized as part of a long-standing web of social and economic networks stretching far beyond their city limits and the current milieu. Lobsang's reaction is telling because it highlights, even in its hesitation or refusal, the hegemony of a certain abstract way of fixing place, separated from the reality of lived experience. It is reminiscent of the idea of "cartographic anxiety," an anxiety that stems from knowing that a map is only a representation of a supposed objectivity, and the resulting sense of the separation between "the knower and the world" (Pickles 2004: 195, n. 4).

By looking at the competing processes of making places more visible or coherent, this research is intended to be a contribution to transnational studies and border studies,

foregrounding an explicit conversation between anthropology and geography. Mapping, with its hegemonic history, is simply one way of fixing a place or places. Making or fixing a trade route can take the form of simply saying that a trade object comes from Tibet. It can take the form of going to one trading town and bypassing another, perhaps because of a landslide or a known security block. It can take the form of images and representations of trade hubs remembered from narratives of past generations. No matter what form they take, these patterns of making place are historically continuous. In British colonial accounts, the trade route between Lhasa and Kalimpong was "a region to be manipulated or overcome in the individual's search for a given destination, not an area to be lived in and through" (Black 2000: 13). The goal in this dissertation is to try to discover why such geographical blindspots are formed, who created them and for what particular interests, and to show by contrast how the route is actually "lived in and through."

Chapter Organization

In this overview, I have laid out a basic sketch of the large-scale historical and economic shifts in the region, as well as my overarching themes: geographical blindspots and the tensions between mobility and fixity in ever-changing social landscapes. In Chapter One, I will introduce my methodology and main research questions, and situate the project within and across some of the existing literature on transnationalism, commodities, and borders. In Chapter Two, I will provide several brief but detailed historical "snapshots" of the history of the trade route that connects Lhasa with Kalimpong, merged with ethnographic accounts from older traders who were operating

prior to the closing of Nathu-la. In particular, I will focus on the older generation's experiences with the transport and trade of more "traditional" commodities such as wool and shoes as well as those goods that were newly introduced in the 1930s and 1940s, such as cosmetics. I also look at stories concerning the "Border Baba," a Sikh soldier stationed on Nathu-la pass in the mid-60s, whose ghost was said to have reappeared and given the state of India the "go-ahead" to reopen the pass in July 2006.

Chapter Three will outline the various social and economic changes that traders have experienced during the immediate period prior to the inauguration of the railroad in Tibet and the reopening of the Nathu-la mountain pass between Sikkim and Tibet in 2006. I will revisit some recent literature on border areas, demonstrating that border regions are critical sites for highlighting the tensions between spatial and temporal mobility and fixity. In this chapter, I also examine the politics of naming and the significance of the past for the future of the economy (e.g. the media hype over the opening of the "Silk Route" and the traders' alternative mappings of what the route represents to them). I will also look at the rhetoric of two rival groups in Kalimpong; those for and against the re-opening of Jelep-la, an additional pass for trade.

In Chapter Four, I narrow the focus to concentrate on traders' experiences with one specific commodity, wool, in order to illustrate how the networks of exchange have transformed geographically since the time of the older generation of traders. Since wool has historically been the main item of trade in this region, I will use interviews with those who were and are involved in wool trading networks (including those involved in the production of carpets or woolen handicrafts for the western market) to see where the wool production and trading networks intersect with other networks such as the sale of

mobile phones. I will ask how has the wool trade changed since the 1940s, how has it been rerouted after the border closing in 1962, and what are traders doing now to "revitalize" the trade in Tibetan wool for local and international markets?

The fifth chapter continues the ethnographic inquiry into tensions between mobility and fixity, this time outlining some of the dynamics between state-level regulatory mechanisms and traders' interpretations of (or movements against) these regulations. I argue that "opening" a border or "freeing" new spaces for trade paradoxically provides more opportunities for regulation. Some case studies will include traders' experiences with new ID laws and how they work their way around these laws, the kinds of commodities that they are allowed to trade, and how these commodities are sometimes turned into gifts. I also address some cases of the (il)licit border trade in the Himalayan region. I stress that traders do not always "resist" state rhetoric but will collaborate with state regulations at specific times to make a profit.

Chapter Six moves back out to describe how the entire region has changed economically and geographically over the past 60 years, and attempts to fit its economic history into the larger story of long-term global economic shifts. As China is extending its capital development westwards into Tibet and searching for new markets in South Asia, Kalimpong and Kathmandu are being bypassed. By looking to the railroad and new border openings as opportunities for new market niches, as well as by entering the global handicrafts market, entrepreneurs throughout the region are forging new trading networks that reveal a different topography than that of their grandparents' generation. They are at the same time abandoning other long-standing connections, such as turning away from the Nepal-Tibet border and heading instead to major industrial centers in southern China.

The Conclusion revisits the phenomenon of geographical blindspots in conjunction with Henri Lefebvre's notion of "blind fields," and ends with some theoretical considerations about new hegemonic economic geographies, capitalist processes, and the contribution of this project to the fields of anthropology and geography.

Chapter One

Marketplaces, Middlemen, and Maps

A Word on Methodology and Exposition

How can the focus of this dissertation be simultaneously about people, places, *and* things? Isn't it easier and more effective to conduct an in-depth study of one of the elements that make up the story of the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route, such as a city (e.g., Kalimpong), or an ethnic group (e.g., Tibetans), or an object (e.g., wool), or a theme (e.g., globalization)? After all, George Marcus described these methodological trends (which were relatively "new" in 1995) in his oft-cited *Annual Review of Anthropology* article on multi-sited ethnography. Marcus noted that large-scale concepts in globalization theory – such as world systems or flexible accumulation – were not addressed very well within single-sited ethnography, and that more interdisciplinary and cross-regional methods that followed the paths of people, places, or things were better suited to anthropological research in a rapidly globalizing world (Marcus 1995: 98).

Inspired both by Marcus's work and by the essays in Arjun Appadurai's 1986 *The Social Life of Things* – particularly Igor Kopytoff's essay on tracing the "biography" of an object – the methodology for this project was initially thought of as being one where I would "follow a thing" from consumption to production, along an established trade route (Marcus 1995: 98). I figured I would choose a commodity from the main marketplace in Kalimpong (say, a Tibetan wool carpet), and trace it back through various hands, following trucks laden with other goods, crossing over border checkpoints with nary a

glance by the customs guards, in order to seek out its production site in Tibet, where I would eventually find the nomads that herded the sheep that shed the wool.

This, of course, turned out to be both embarrassingly romantic and methodologically impractical. As I began to inquire about the origins of commodities in the marketplaces of Kalimpong and Lhasa, I discovered that each had such a dense web of far-flung networks of people involved in its production, transport, exchange, and consumption that it was nearly impossible to even begin such a project, partly because of a lack of adequate time and funding. A carpet, for instance, could be made with chemical dyes from Switzerland and India, wool from three different parts of northern Tibet and New Zealand, woven by women in a town outside of Shigatse, and made with a design commissioned by a wealthy businessman in Beijing or London. Although tracing the origins of the carpet turned out to be unfeasible because of the complexity of the far-reaching geographical linkages, what I actually found more limiting were the restrictions and the obstacles – for instance, passport laws, roads that were washed out, and permits needed – that prevented anybody (nomads or anthropologists) from actually being able to "follow a thing" from beginning to end.

By switching my methodology from following the paths of objects to staying put in Lhasa and Kalimpong (and later, Kathmandu), I was able to interview traders, many of whom departed and returned from trading that very day. I realized that it was not only oral narratives of the mobility and fixity of cross-border trading practices, but also our own immediate, lived experiences of moving and fixing in a volatile social and economic environment that could bring together the people, the places, and the things of this study. Putting together a story of traders who cross the national boundaries of China, Nepal, and

India necessarily involves crossing disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary themes such as commodity chains, borderlands, and globalization bring together various strands that are crucial to the disciplines of anthropology and geography, often thought of as having specific and separate theoretical canons.

But such an approach loses the kind of ethnographic specificity or depth particular to a long-term residency in a single village of a few hundred people. Studying moving people in multiple towns is not without its many difficulties; like my original intention to follow the paths of objects, it was impractical to inquire about the details of every trading link (for instance, I never found out where Nepali traders go to purchase wholesale goods in Bangkok, or much about the kinds of vegetables sold by the women who routinely ducked under the Nepal-Tibet border barrier). Nevertheless, the peripatetic nature of this dissertation reflects real frustrations of contemporary cross-border movement against hegemonic state apparatuses. To take a rather self-reflexive example, because of bureaucratic issues between the United States and Indian departments of education, I waited on my Indian research visa for nearly a year. This meant that I ended up diverting 6 months of research time to Kathmandu, which was not included as a research site in the original proposal. Furthermore, due to strikes, curfews, and increasing violence during the peoples' movement against King Gyanendra in Kathmandu in late April 2006, the United States Embassy enforced an "ordered departure" call, informing all US citizens registered with the embassy to leave Nepal as soon as possible (despite the fact that Gyanendra had already conceded). We were told that there were only three cities where we could wait out the call for the ordered departure: Bangkok, Dhaka, and Delhi. Dhaka and Delhi required visas ahead of time, and at that point, we were told the embassies

were crammed with foreigners still trying to leave Nepal. I moved again, to Bangkok. It was weeks before the US Embassy retracted the ordered departure and we were allowed to return to Nepal. I use this rather personal account to emphasize the fact that tensions between movement and halting in the face of state-led restrictions are part and parcel of the intensity of contemporary global connections, and are explicitly geographical.

My expository approach thus mimics the peripatetic, moving-and-stopping-and-moving-again nature of my research methodology. It does not follow a strict chronology or begin with a chapter describing an ethnic group like "The Tibetans." Rather, I am indebted to ethnographic writing such as that in Anna Tsing's *Friction*, emphasizing the collaborations, tensions, and strange bedfellows that emerge from global encounters, or in Tsing's words, "zones of cultural friction that rise out of encounters and interactions" (Tsing 2005: xi). This combination of people, places, and things working in contradictory movements is what leads to the creation of places, routes, and regions.

Just over a decade after Marcus's review article, the conditions for doing fieldwork have changed significantly. In fact, Marcus has recently (2008) criticized the "too-literal understanding of multi-sitedness as simply following objective processes out there by some strategy," likening the initial process of multi-sited ethnography more to an awkward Rube Goldberg machine where the design is developed both by the ethnographer and her engagements with "epistemic partners" (Rabinow et al 2008: 70). As Tobias Rees notes in the same volume, such methods "emphasize the emergent quality of ethnographic knowledge, almost in the sense of a logic of discovery, a discovery of connections, and this practice can only evolve circumstantially, namely in the nitty-gritty arena of fieldwork, in encounters with local others" (Rabinow et al 2008:

70). Accordingly, this chapter serves as a methodological and theoretical background to the emergent ethnographic accounts and analyses that follow in the rest of the dissertation. I began with a personal methodological account, discussing how I came to focus on the tensions between fixity and mobility. I will next show how these tensions are central to the arguments in this project. I then outline two literatures that cross the fields of cultural anthropology, human geography, and material culture studies which serve as the basis for my work: commodity chains and border studies. Finally, I set the scene for the rest of the chapters by offering up a brief background on our key players: the places and the people that make the routes.

Fixing the Route, or, Against Flows: Mobility and Fixity

Contemporary discourses of globalization and transnationalism are concerned with the rapid increase of people, capital, images, and commodities moving, migrating, or being transported over national borders, "compressing our sense of time and space and making the world feel smaller" (Inda and Rosaldo 2001:4). Part of what emerged from the anthropological literature on globalization in the early 1990s was an emphasis on the increased mobility, "flows," and the border-crossings of goods and people, as well as the notion that deterritorialization or the breaking down of borders was one consequence of this increase in movement (see Appadurai 1991; Clifford 1997; Marcus 1995). While there is no doubt that capitalist development – which accelerated in the early 1990s, partly due to technological innovations and information networks – has led to the acceleration of migration and flows of capital in certain areas, this study instead highlights the contradictory and uneven processes of globalization. I concentrate not on

recent flows, but on the *disruptions* of earlier flows, showing that these cross-border processes are not new, even in a region of the world like the Himalayan plateau, often depicted as "timeless" or "remote."

If contradictory movements in the form of escalating inequality and unevenness are characteristic of our current milieu, as has been acknowledged by critical geographers (Harvey 1990, 1999; Smith 1984), did they also characterize the past? How might we begin to ethnographically explore tensions that exist between mobility and fixity, movement and stability over time? Although nothing is ever completely stable (even rocks and mountains wear down eventually), I call for a more nuanced exploration of the relationships between barriers and movement instead of just focusing on the latter, as has been done over the past few decades. Ali Behdad, for instance, has criticized theorists of flows and movement for "privileging theories of displacement over location," pointing out that actual experiences of movement – in the case of refugees having to flee their homes, for example – are not always celebratory (Behdad 2005: 231). Moreover, Doreen Massey insists that scholars ought to look more closely at differential mobility and how the *control of mobility* by some people weakens others, such as how the use of personal cars by some reduces others' ability to take public transport (Massey 1993: 62-63, my emphasis). In this dissertation, I follow Behdad and Massey by angling my discussion of trade in the Himalayas towards "fixing" practices – both hegemonic and not – that might obstruct mobility for some. What I mean by "fixing" are *practices that attempt to make certain places more visible or coherent, both spatially and temporally.* When a long-standing trade route is threatened to be re-routed or moved by political or economic intervention (or blinded, as discussed in the overview), various groups may find the need

to make these places secure again, or to re-insert new meanings into older places that have been transformed or are no longer familiar.[9]

In the second chapter, which deals with the 20th century history of the Lhasa-Kalimpong route and British attempts to make it available for trade, the practices of "opening" or "closing" a border or a road are fraught with complexities that far surpass simple understandings of the terms "to open" or "to close." In this project, I shall ask *who* is trying to halt others' access to mobility, for what reasons, with what consequences? This is not because I believe stability to be more important than mobility; but, as I have stressed, these dynamics are in significant tension with each other, and different ways of fixing, or making place, need to be studied together. In a late capitalist world characterized by "flows," it is important to ask where we can locate the tensions between geographical fixity and mobility; i.e., which areas or people are becoming more mobile and which areas or people are becoming more stable? Are these tensions related to generations, class, or gender, for instance? Further, these processes happen simultaneously, often leading to "major transformations in the scalar organization of the territorial state" (Brenner 1998: 474). Such geographical transformations are produced not only at the level of the state, but all the way down to the level of the individual trader, and even, as I shall argue later, at the level of the object.

One useful yet abstract way of theorizing the "fixing of place" from the perspective of large-scale histories of capital can be found in David Harvey's work, where he discusses two kinds of "fixing" strategies: the idea of "fixed capital" and the "spatio-temporal fix." Fixed capital is a physical – but not necessarily immobile – form

[9] Don Mitchell, citing Raymond Williams, points out that one of the purposes of creating a landscape is to make the view look natural, as if it were made on its own, for "landscape is both a work and an erasure of work" (Mitchell 1996: 6).

of capital (such as caravan mules, a train, or an airport), which is "literally fixed in and on the land in some physical form for a relatively long period of time" (Harvey 2003: 115). In fact, Marx, in *Capital, Volume II*, warns his readers numerous times not to assume that immobile objects are automatically fixed capital, highlighting the tensions between the two (Marx 1992: 242, 288-9). In other words, economic fixity is not the same as physical or geographical fixity. What is important for our purposes here is that investments in "fixed" things (whether in yaks, a road, or a credit system) are made in order to allow goods or services to move more quickly, and profits to be reaped in the future. Fixed capital, however, can also act as a spatio-temporal "fix" to a problem: "a particular kind of solution to capitalist crises through temporal deferral and geographical expansion" (Harvey 2003: 115). One of the ironies of the movement of capital is that it creates its own barriers to further accumulation, and that these barriers must be overcome (Mitchell 1996: 112). Using both Harvey's writings and anthropological theory as a framework, I will ask how such large-scale capitalist practices of fixing place are both experienced and enacted by traders in Asia. Neil Brenner has noted that "…as in previous waves of capitalist restructuring, the politics of scale in the current era entails not only the effort to deconstruct inherited scalings of social, economic and political relations but a wide range of sociopolitical strategies to fix them anew within relatively stabilized geographical structures and transformed 'power-geometries'" (Brenner 1998: 479; Massey 1993). As I will show, these "re-fixing" strategies can work both against and with such larger scale transformations.

Thus, one of my major goals is to contribute to critical debates in anthropology that seek to connect the often abstract rhetoric of globalization and transnationalism with

its more local experiences. By revisiting earlier anthropological work concerned with how social and political networks are involved in the exchange of material culture (Cohen 1969; Malinowski 1967; Mauss 1967), this project will ask how a study of long-distance trade and traders might now be conceptualized in relation to rapid economic development in a part of the world previously thought of as "remote." By ethnographically investigating far-flung, cross-border social relations intertwined with the production, exchange, and consumption of materials, I aim to extend arguments against state-centered notions of globalization or "national economies" (van Schendel 2002, Winichakul 1994). In this next section, I will outline the two broad theoretical arcs that frame this project: 1) the social life of things and commodity chains, and 2) border studies.

The Social Life of Things, Commodity Chains, and Practices of Everyday Life

Scholars remain divided over how to weigh the relative importance of production, exchange, and consumption in the processes of trade and capitalist accumulation. Two different but related anthropological trajectories that serve as background to this dissertation attempt to investigate the interconnections between these processes: a) models examining the "social life" or "biography" of commodities in order to trace their trajectory through varying phases of production, exchange, *and* consumption, and b) models of commodity chains tracing production and consumption processes across borders.

Anthropological studies of the "lives" of objects (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; Myers 2001; Thomas 1991) have demonstrated that social relationships are

necessarily involved in the acquisition, exchange, distribution, and marketing of goods; and research on commodity chains (such as Sidney Mintz's oft-cited study of the cultural history of sugar in the Caribbean [1985] or Theodore Bestor's work on the global sushi market [2001]) have effectively shown how active participants in these chains are both locally and globally situated (see also Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994; Haugerud et al 2000; Humphrey et al 1992; Wallerstein 2000). However, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, tracing an object's journey – along with its multiple social connections – from its moment of production to its moment of consumption remains a lofty, but unrealizable goal. I will focus instead on the importance of traders as intermediaries or mediators in influencing the travels of, and the control over the knowledge of, commodities. The role of middlemen or "cultural brokers" in trade transactions has been addressed in the anthropological literature, most often, however, from the perspective of art markets or dealers (Graburn 1976; Plattner 1996; Steiner 1994). I will follow a number of existing studies (Cohen 1969; Hansen 2000; Nordstrom 2007; White 2000; Ziegler 2004) that emphasize the role of the intermediary in long-distance or transnational trade, and build upon these by highlighting traders' experiences of geographical changes to their cross-border trade networks and practices.

The commodity itself, as Marx has shown, has no inherent value or meaning; rather, people insert values and meanings into objects, so that the same object might have radically different values in different contexts. Although there have been critiques of the Marxian approach to the commodity (e.g., Miller 1995), I find Marx's angle critical in order to pay specific attention to how values and meanings attributed to commodities are connected to places and ideas of place. For instance, I will later show how certain sheep

wool products, no matter what their true origins might be, are seen as tied to a specific kind of Tibetan landscape, one that is "pure" and detached from the current reality of Chinese ownership and development. Keeping in mind the Marxian claim that the commodity form obscures original social relations and production (and accordingly, geographical origins), I hope to show how other kinds of social and geographical connections are reinserted into commodities in complex ways, and are always caught up in political struggles.[10] Furthermore, linking commodities to certain places for purposes of profit and/or politics can result in turning other places into "geographical blindspots."

Where then, might it be appropriate to even begin an inquiry into the tangled linkages between places, people, and things? It is, according to Henri Lefebvre, "in the unmysterious depths of everyday life" that we need to begin our study of spatial practices in anthropology. Lefebvre and others have suggested that social structures and spatial meanings can be extrapolated from detailed analyses of everyday *practices*. The examination of seemingly trivial activities such as walking along city streets (de Certeau) or the routine use of material goods in the home (Bourdieu) reveal the varied uses and construction of various kinds of social places – public and private, class, gendered, etc. – as well as social struggles over the control of territory or the unequal distribution of resources. Along with technological progress and the mass manufacturing of consumer goods comes a simultaneous increase in the physical and emotional distance between people and the production of things (Marx 1992 [1857]; Simmel 1990 [1907]). Again, a major goal of this dissertation is to connect an ethnographic study of things and everyday practices with the more abstract theories of mobility and fixity described earlier. One

[10] For instance, a friend told me that during the start of the 2001 U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, the prices of dried fruits skyrocketed in Delhi. Although traders had historically brought dried fruit to India by traders from Afghanistan, these particular dried fruits were actually from California.

starting point, perhaps, is to recall Lefebvre's notes on the commodity in *The Production of Space*. I quote it here in full:

> As for the commodity in general, it is obvious that kilograms of sugar, sacks of coffee beans and metres of fabric cannot do duty as the material underpinning of its existence. The stores and warehouses where these things are kept, where they wait, the ships, trains and trucks that transport them – and hence the routes used – have also to be taken into account. Furthermore, having considered all these objects individually, one still has not properly apprehended the material underpinning of the world of commodities. Nor do such notions as 'channel', derived from information theory, or 'repertoire', help us define such an ensemble of objects. The same goes for the idea of 'flows'. It has to be remembered that these objects constitute relatively determinate networks or chains of exchange within a space. The world of commodities would have no 'reality' without such moorings or points of insertion, or without their existing as an ensemble. The same may be said of banks and banking-networks vis-à-vis the capital market and money transfers, and hence vis-à-vis the comparison and balancing of profits and the distribution of surplus value [Lefebvre 1991: 403].

A bag of barley flour brought across the borders of Tibet and Nepal is not disconnected from the people who transport it, nor from "moorings" such as warehouses or the mules that carry the goods across the Himalayas. The idea, according to Lefebvre and Marx, is to not simply consider commodities in and of themselves, but also the social networks that comprise and connect the production, exchange, and consumption of commodities. As Marx has written, "commodities themselves cannot go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities" (Marx 1990: 178). And yet, even the possessors of commodities do not always go to market by their own choice. "Things lie," wrote Lefebvre, "…they lie in order to conceal their origin, namely social labour, they tend to set themselves up as absolutes. Products and the circuits they establish (in space) are fetishized and so become more 'real' than reality itself – that is, the productive

activity itself, which they thus take over" (Lefebvre 1991: 81). The challenge in this study is to show *how* the various values and meanings inserted in objects by traders are related to larger economic processes. How can we look at the productive aspects of the journeys of commodities together with their "moorings" in order to examine the history of changes along the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route? As I mentioned earlier, although a trade route may appear on a map to be a line linking Town A and Town B, the "on the ground" experience of trade rarely follows that simple path. The activities that occur in between (and beyond) A and B, in effect enabling a spatial change in the trajectory of the goods – calling suppliers on mobile phones, loading crates of electronics onto container ships, leading mules over the Himalayas, driving trucks – are productive, and very often ignored in much of the anthropological literature on trade. In this next section, I will introduce some of the background literature that I have found helpful in conceptualizing the movement of goods across the Himalayas.

Borderland Economies

Perhaps with the exception of "Tibet, the Roof of the World," most representations of the region I am concerned with are rather unflattering.[11] Take for instance Sikkim and North Bengal, which make up a strip in the northeast of India bordered by Nepal, Tibet, Bangladesh, and Bhutan, sometimes called the "chicken's neck" of India, or, in a tongue-in-cheek article by Kanak Dixit of *Himal Southasian*, the "the mouth of the tube of toothpaste that is India, squeezed out through this orifice, to exude into the eight states of the Indian Northeast" (Dixit: 2002). Further, "Nepal likes

[11] Then again, much of the "Roof of the World" imagery – found not just in the West but within China as well – tends to reinforce the idea of Tibet as an inaccessible, mysterious, and remote land.

to think of itself as the proverbial yam sandwiched between two boulders" (i.e., China and India) (Turin and Shneiderman 2003: 8).

The attachment of names or particular images to places is laden with meaning; in these cases, certain areas are depicted as marginal, or at least as not important to the surrounding territory. Although Rob Shields has said that "marginal places are not necessarily on geographical peripheries, but they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space," one further question is to look at how people *use* the status of geographical marginality to achieve economic goals (Shields 1991: 3).

Scholars who work in Tibet and amongst Tibetan-speaking communities often find themselves having to justify their existence within university area studies departments. The Tibetan-speaking Himalayan region – which includes Tibet (the Tibet Autonomous Region, or TAR, currently under Chinese administration) plus what some scholars call "historical" or "cultural" Tibet, that is, the Chinese provinces of Gansu, Sichuan, Qinghai, and Yunnan, as well as parts of Bhutan, northern Nepal, north and northeast India, and Burma – does not conveniently fit into currently familiar area studies categories such as "East Asia," "Central Asia," "Southeast Asia" and "South Asia." It is precisely this area's lack of conformity to existing conventional geographical configurations (whether as a nation-state, or as part of "South Asia" or "East Asia") that creates the need for a more nuanced exploration of its important social and economic linkages. The question, "Why doesn't this region qualify as an institutional 'area'?" is outlined by Willem van Schendel in an article on rethinking area studies in Asia. van Schendel presents an interesting heuristic idea: he asks his readers to consider an area of which no map can be found; this area, which he dubs "Zomia," includes patches of

Burma, northeast India, Bhutan, China, Nepal, Tibet, and Bangladesh (van Schendel 2002: 647-668). Representing an alternative spatial scale that is neither national nor global, he shows that this regional scale matters significantly for many people living in the area because of various long-standing economic, social, and cultural connections. Following David Ludden and Owen Lattimore, who maintain that frontiers are shaped less by geographical conditions than by the impact of those who created them, we need to look at transformations of territory in spaces that national maps conceal or ignore (Lattimore 1968: 384; Ludden 2003: 1070). If spaces are not simply "there," but are instead produced by those who have various claims over them, the challenge, then, is to investigate in detail how nonmainstream representations of space are rooted in history and produced, conditioned, structured, and experienced in everyday life. This is especially significant for those living in the region that includes Sikkim and northern Bengal, northeastern India, Bhutan, eastern Nepal and Tibet, often obscured or blinded by contemporary discourses that focus on macro-level analyses of the "rising economies of India and China." As I will show in later chapters, examining these processes of region-making is crucial, as it often involves struggles over representation and space.

Anthropological writing on cross-border networks and identities has grown quite extensive since the publication of Ben Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Though the bulk of work on trade or security along border areas is still focused on the US-Mexico border, some excellent case-based studies of social actors and the state in other border regions have emerged in recent years, such as Lynn Stephen's study of Oaxacan transborder communities (Stephen 2007) and Carolyn Nordstrom's work on global smuggling across economic war zones (also see for

example Abraham and van Schendel 2005; Aggarwal 2004; Andreas 2000; Konstantinov 1996; Wilson and Donnan 1998; van Schendel 2005). This project seeks to extend the existing literature by stressing the need to tie broader, geographically informed perspectives on transnational trade to ethnographic studies of cross-border experiences, such as narratives of transnational traders or the logistics of transport in border regions. Such a conceptualization is useful for building connections between daily interactions with material life and the study of long-term geographical shifts of capital, and because it directly addresses a question raised by anthropologists over the past twenty years or so: how might one connect studies of small-scale (or "local") social practices with more abstract theories based on economic change at a global level? This interdisciplinary attempt to examine the interconnections between global historical change and daily interactions with material life is partly a reaction against more geographically limiting sub-fields such as urban anthropology or area studies.

Historically, critiques of political economy and globalization from a wide range of disciplines have had a significant influence on anthropology (e.g., Abu-Lughod 1991; Arrighi 1994; Braudel 1982; Castells 1996; Curtin 1984; Harvey 1990; Lattimore 1962; Marx 1976; Polanyi 1944). Within this body of work, scholarship on world historical systems, such as Philip Curtin's study on world trade, Fernand Braudel's writing on European capitalism, and perhaps of most relevance, Owen Lattimore's work on inner Asian frontiers, all feature large-scale processes of place-making without losing sight of the particularities of "material life," grounding macro-historical work in the detailed analyses of peoples' everyday experiences with the exchange of commodities. Relatively neglected by contemporary social scientists (save for his role in the McCarthy

indictments), Lattimore's historical understanding of large-scale capitalist change in inner Asia, for instance, stems from his early work on nomad traders in Mongolia and his personal experience as a traveling salesman of British goods in China. As Lattimore himself puts it in the Preface to *Studies in Frontier History and Society*, he looked to "treat history not as a series of invasions and pressures but as an interacting mode" (Lattimore 1962: 30). It is in these footsteps that I wish to follow, demonstrating why the use of ethnography is integral to understanding large-scale shifts in capital in a region that is still relatively unrepresented in these macro histories. The next two sections of this chapter are intended as a broad background to the places and the people that help make up the story of contemporary trade between Lhasa and Kalimpong.

The Places: Anthropological Work on Tibet and the Himalayas

The contemporary study of Tibet and Tibetan-speaking communities in the Himalayas cannot be detached from Tibet's complex politico-religious history. Many political and cultural histories of the region have focused on the debate over whether Tibet has historically always been part of China, an independent entity, or which particular moments in Tibetan history have been characterized by autonomy and which by subjugation. Although the influence and transformation of Buddhist practices in Tibetan-speaking Himalayan communities has until recently remained a dominant theme in anthropological investigations, this dissertation centers instead on the economic history and cultural politics of the region. Such a focus is intended to suggest that the struggle over the control of trade routes and economic networks has been a crucial factor in the production of the history and geography of the region. To take a few widely separated

examples, the development of 8th century Silk Road trade routes to Lhasa facilitated the passage of religious tribute caravans (Klimberg-Salter 1982); the British invasion of Tibet in 1904 was partly prompted by Britain's declining control over trade and its colonial properties (Cammann 1970); and the Tibetan Trade Delegation, formed around the time of Indian independence in 1947, served to promote the idea of Tibet as an independent nation while at the same time ostensibly exploring trade agreements with India, China, and the United States (Shakabpa 1967). These events will be elaborated upon in the next chapter, which deals in more detail with the history of economic shifts in the region.

Much anthropological scholarship concerning Tibet or Tibetans has until recently consisted of fieldwork amongst Tibetan populations in exile communities in Nepal and India (see for example Diehl 2002; Klieger 1992; McGuckin 1997), studies of Western representations of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism (Bishop 1989; Dodin and Räther 2001), or of research outside the city of Lhasa (e.g. Goldstein and Beall 1989; Makley 2003). A handful of anthropological studies have explored trade and barter in the Himalayan region (Fewkes 2008; Fisher 1987; Humphrey 1992; Rizvi 1999; van Spengen 2000; von Fürer-Haimendorf 1975); these however have focused on activity along the India-Western TAR or Nepal-TAR border, an area with significantly different environmental, political, and economic conditions from those of the Lhasa-Kalimpong route. Nor has there been much anthropological work on Tibetan communities residing in the northeastern portions of India, save for Tanka Subba's research on Tibetan refugees in Darjeeling and Sikkim (Subba 1990).

There are several excellent biographies, memoirs, and even fictional accounts of Newar, Tibetan, and Muslim traders who have traded between Lhasa and Kalimpong in the 20th century; most of these are to be found in local bookshops in Lhasa, Kalimpong, Gangtok, and Kathmandu (Dondrup 2000; Hilker 2005; Hridaya 2002; Lall 2001; Radhu 1997; Saha 2003; Tenzin 2004; Tuladhar, 2004). With new relaxations of visa requirements for researchers who wish to work in the TAR, as well as the establishment of official partnerships between foreign universities and academic institutions in Tibet between 2000-2008, the field opened up to accommodate research on issues such as Tibetan medicine, contemporary art, historical politics, and agriculture (Adams 2002, Barnett 2006; Harris 1999, McGranahan 2002; Yeh 2003).[12]

Within the last few years, a significant portion of global media attention has been dedicated to the accelerated growth of the Chinese and Indian economies. For the past, ethnographic studies of market cultures, from village-level periodic markets to overseas business networks sustained by the practice of *guanxi*, have proven useful for understanding capitalist change in the region. The recent transformation of the Himalayan region – geographically at the margins of India and China, and yet at the center of a rapidly developing economic cross-roads – has prompted a body of literature concerning the uneven nature of participation in the growth of capitalism. Studies of the mass labor migration (the "floating population") of Sichuanese farmers into Himalayan areas, state restrictions on nomadic herding, and tourism as a major industry in the Himalayas are logical follow-ups to the earlier explorations of the contradictions and

[12] The mass protests in the TAR in March 2008 and Chinese worries over security before and during the 2008 Olympics have led to the indefinite cancellation of most of these partnerships. At the time of writing (March 2009), the TAR has been closed to foreigners in anticipation of possible Tibetan unrest during the 50th anniversary of the exile of the Dalai Lama to India.

uneven distribution of capitalist accumulation. Furthermore, the introduction of new infrastructure projects such as the building of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad and the reopening of a Sino-Indian mountain pass for trade suggest a reconfiguration of the geography of the region and further stratification along gendered, ethnic, and class lines. Some very good contemporary studies of economy and trade in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and North Bengal/Sikkim (Anand 2008; Arora 2008; Fischer 2005; Hu 2004; Sautman 2006; Yeh 2007b) have emerged just within the last 5 years. My work seeks to add a more qualitative dimension to the existing literature, by further understanding the connections between local-scale transmission of trade knowledge and recent political and economic transformations in the eastern Himalayan region.

There have been many (often contradictory) variations in the production and interpretation of images of the Himalayan landscape. Western, Chinese, Indian, and Tibetan perspectives found in travel writings, anthropological work, and tourist accounts have shaped and re-shaped the region as a mystical "Shangri-la," as a territory ripe for mineral exploitation and urban development, as a feudal theocracy, as a borderland marred by crime and prostitution, and so forth. This dissertation returns to the foundational practices of "making" the region, where the social practices of traders along the Himalayan frontier provide a key vantage point from which to analyze the changing value of commodities and the production of place.

The People: Trade, Traders, and Ethnicity

In anthropology, studies of trade and traders are often limited to ethnic groups, with research concentrating on "Pathan communities," "Hausa migrants," "Manangi

traders," or "Akha traders" (Barth 1998 [1969]; Cohen 1969; Ratanapruck 2008; Toyota 2000). While I began this project intending to interview "Tibetan traders," it soon became clear to me that I could not concentrate on a single ethnic community; asking questions about the wool trade from Lhasa to Kalimpong, for instance, involves complex networks of nomads, middlemen, and merchants that transcend territory and, accordingly, any sole ethnic category. Sheep, for example, might be herded by nomadic Amdowas (a Tibetan-speaking regional group from the northeast), the wool might be purchased and transported to Lhasa by the Hui (Chinese Muslims), carded and spun by half-Tibetan half-Nepali women, brought over the mountain pass by Newar muleteers (a Buddhist ethnic group from Kathmandu, Nepal), and sold in Sikkim by Marwari merchants (business families originally from Rajasthan) or by Bhutias (Tibetans who have lived in Sikkim for centuries). For instance, in an historical memoir of Newar trade, one man living in Kalimpong had a shop that "became the meeting place for the Newaris, Tibetans, and Marwaris: the place to get new information. In particular, he put in a good word for other traders so they could become prospective business partners; he became someone all could trust, and soon became the most influential middleman in Kalimpong" (Hilker 2005: 42-43). It is these types of transnational interactions – regardless of whether or not the various groups actually 'got along' – that led me to use the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route as a framework for this project, rather than ethnic groups, the study of which (even since Eric Wolf's famous critique against treating cultural groups as "billiard balls") can still leave the impression that they exist in isolation or as self-contained cultural units.

This is not to say that these groups failed to uphold a level of community or cultural coherence; for instance, the Tuladhars, a Newar family that owned shops and offices in Kathmandu, Lhasa, and Kolkata, would send male family members to Tibet for extended periods of time, between 3 and 10 years, from as early as the mid-1800s until the 1950s, while the women would remain at home in Kathmandu (Tuladhar 2004: 18-19). The merchants in Lhasa had community centers, organized festivals, and maintained *guthis*, "socio-religious organizations that unite individuals to perform certain tasks which often have a religious goal or motive at base" (Lewis 2003: 51; Lall 2001; Tuladhar 2004: 20-21). Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate later, minority groups do not necessarily share common experiences of oppression and "a common goal to displace hegemonic powers" vis-à-vis "the majority" (Lionnet and Shih 2005: 234). This is true, moreover, not just between different minority groups, but even within the category of "Tibetans." Since the time of the Dalai Lama's departure from Tibet in 1959, a number of Tibetans have established active exile communities in India and Nepal. These communities have developed along considerably different social and political lines from the majority of Tibetans who still reside in the TAR, as well as from those who live in other Tibetan-speaking communities in China. Yet there remains a tendency for scholars to base their knowledge of "Tibetans in general" on research in a single community. Though this is partly a result of heavy restrictions on research in the Himalayan region, it need not be a given. This study attempts to provide a corrective by highlighting the cultural and political specificities of the region's varied communities, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of the production and maintenance of transnational social and economic networks, the varying kinds of territorial and economic struggles

taking place in communities on both sides of the Sino-Indian border, and the politically charged meanings of "nationalist," sometimes used as synonymous with "separatist" in the TAR. It will also introduce an important new trajectory in contemporary Tibet: the development of a transnational entrepreneurial elite who are neither advocates of a Tibetan independence movement nor supporters of the Chinese regime. Studies of the development of this new "modern" elite as well as research that investigates the creation of official ethnic minority categories in the PRC raise issues such as the authenticity of Tibetan-ness (versus Chinese-ness), and how urban communities are divided along ethnic and class lines.

What do I mean, then, by "trader"? In earlier centuries, "the word 'trade' meant a craft, to distinguish it from a commercial calling," but around the time British imperialism reached its zenith in the 19th century, it became "associated with commerce and risk taking…the word has swung around completely" (Adams 1974: 141). The role of the "trader" – at least in the west – shifted from one of production to one of exchange and profit. In much of the existing literature on trade, there is a conscious effort to distinguish merchants, specialists in mediation for profit, from traders, whose roles could include producing the goods they exchanged (Adams 1974: 239). John Middleton, in his study of Swahili merchants, has distinguished between the roles of merchants and traders by stating that "merchants differ from traders in that they act as intermediaries between different producers and consumers," whereas the role of traders, who tend to be more mobile, is limited to the direct exchange of what they have produced with what someone else has produced (Harris 2007; Middleton 2003: 509-510). Indeed, I have seen many traders acting as producers or vice versa; for example, a small-scale trader might make

woolen jackets in his home village and then bring them to the Lhasan marketplace to sell. However, in my experience, it seemed that the line between merchants and traders was often extremely fuzzy; both may act as intermediaries and negotiators who bridge the distance between production and consumption by participating in local exchange (Steiner 1994: 130).[13]

In the context of this study, then, I consider traders as "middlemen of varying degrees," but I do not make further distinctions between different types of middlemen like Caroline Humphrey does in her work on post-socialist trade and barter in Russia (e.g., "shuttlers," who travel with their goods, and "trader-retailers," who have the money to purchase a small shop in addition to their trading activities, Humphrey 1999: 37-38). I am more concerned with the ways that the stratified "degrees" of trading specialization or identity may emerge from stories and experiences along the trade route and embody tensions between mobility and fixity. As we shall see, there are trading elites, such as the three wealthy Tibetan families from the Kham region of Tibet who held the monopoly over wool. By contrast, traders who bring Chinese toilet paper to local shops in Nepal dramatize the differences between "big" and "small" traders. There are stratifications in gender: women remain at retail shops in town while the men move with the mule caravans. The gap between different kinds of trading groups seems to be increasing as unequal economic and geographic development also escalates. Finally, although some trading practices may occasionally take the shape of Scott's "everyday forms of resistance" or de Certeauian "tactics," others at times overlap with and contribute to

[13] The Tibetan term for "trader," *tshong pa* or *tshong mkhan*, usually implies both "trader" and "merchant," as does the Nepali word, "*byāpāri*". According to some people I spoke with, being called a trader is sometimes considered derogatory; the occupation has been historically associated with cheating and swindling (Humphrey 1997; Braudel 1992: 558)

powerful state practices. The point is to show that various kinds of trade routes are in fact *created* by all these kinds of practices. In the next chapter, I provide several "snapshots" of the social and economic history of the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route, complemented by ethnographic accounts from older traders who were operating prior to the closing of Nathu-la in 1962.

Chapter Two

Commodities and Connections

Trade and the *Tibetan Mirror*

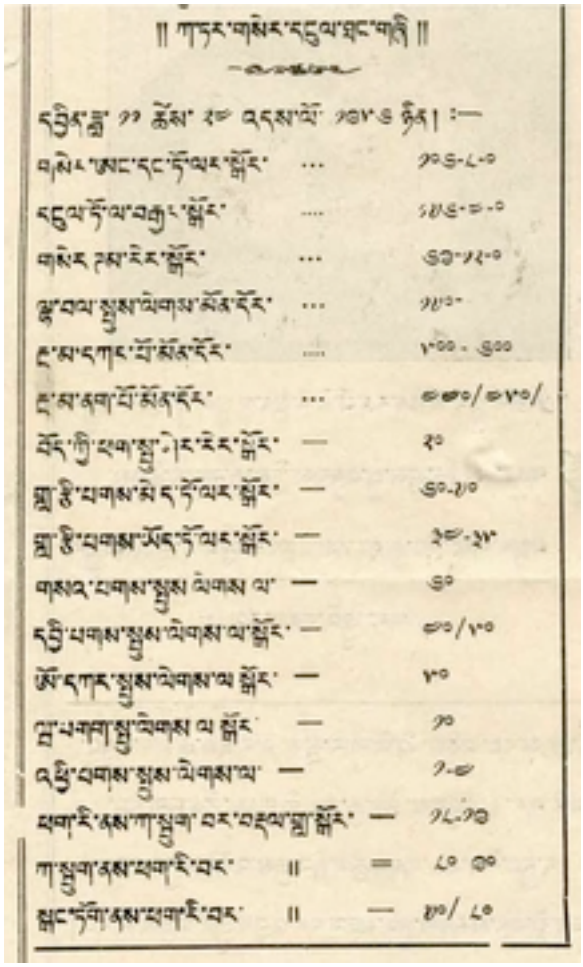


Figure 6. List of commodity prices in the *Tibetan Mirror*, November 24th, 1956

The above newspaper clipping lists prices for various commodities traded between Lhasa and Kalimpong. It is taken from the November 24th, 1956 edition of a Tibetan-language newspaper published in Kalimpong, called the *Tibetan Mirror* (*yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur me long*). These listings, which were in nearly every issue of

the newspaper from its start in 1925 until its demise in 1963, gave its readers an idea of what the "market prices in Gold and Silver from Calcutta" looked like, as well as the prices of common items brought from Tibet to Kalimpong. The items were priced in rupees per *mon do* (maund, a bulk weight of approximately 40-80 kg), and included the following prices per maund: white yaks' tails (800-900 Rs [about 167-188 US$]), black yak tails (440-480 Rs [92-100$]), Tibetan pig-hair bristles for hair brushes (20 Rs [4$]), musk without skin (60-70 Rs [13-15$]), best quality snow leopard fur (60 Rs [13$]), best quality fox fur (10 Rs [2$]), and best quality marmot fur (1-4 Rs [0.20-0.84 cents]). Mule caravan transport costs were also listed: the journey from Phari to Kalimpong cost 18-19 Rs (4$); Kalimpong to Phari 80-90 Rs (17-19$).[14]

The *Tibetan Mirror* newspaper was established by Gergan Dorje Tharchin in Kalimpong in 1925, and had a small but far-reaching distribution, selling approximately 200-500 copies from Amdo (northwestern Tibet) to Assam (northeastern India) until 1963.[15] It was transported by the same mule caravans that carried the yak tails and musk listed in the clipping above and was disseminated to medium- and large-scale merchants, traders, and intellectuals living in the towns dotted along the trade routes (Fader 2002: 282). The newspaper provided world and regional news, children's stories, a science section, proverbs, and maps; specific examples include advertisements for wool carders and for "Asiatic Soap"; articles about trade disputes, articles about bad weather damaging the wool in the caravans, and notices announcing changes in state trading policies.

[14] See Appendix B for a translation of the entire clipping, as well as for a sample advertisement from the *Mirror*.
[15] Popularly named Tharchin Babu, he was a Christian missionary from Kinnaur, in eastern Himachal Pradesh.

Although I do not plan to go into detail on the history of the *Mirror*,[16] it is important to note that these regular columns about trade in the region, as well as listings of trade prices, demonstrate that such "transnational" trading practices have long permeated the economic life of the towns along the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route. Trading news and information literally traveled along the route with the wool itself; Tibet at this time was not remote in the way that Europeans may have believed, and was in fact very much part of a regional and international economy. To take one example, yak tails – particularly white ones – were of quite high value because of their use as Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist ritual implements, as flywhisks, and as wigs and Santa Claus beards in Europe and the United States.[17]

A deeper understanding of both the social and geopolitical history of trade between Tibet, India, and Nepal – as well as trade connections to such larger powers as Britain and the US – is integral to how we understand the region's present economic shifts. While geopolitical strategies have indeed affected the direction of the trade routes – for instance, the 18th- and 19th-century British push to "open" Tibet as a market for goods and development and the Chinese "develop the west" campaign of recent history – traders themselves often have qualitatively different experiences of such changes. Plans

[16] The history of the *Mirror* is explained in further detail in books such as Tsering Shakya's *Dragon in the Land of Snows* and H. Louis Fader's Christian bio-history of Tharchin Babu; however, now that nearly the full run of newspapers has been collected at the Starr East Asian Library at Columbia University, my next project is to collect, translate, and prepare a manuscript based on the trade-related articles and advertisements in the *Mirror*.

[17] As a result of North American trade embargos on China in the 1950s, Tibetan exports such as yak tails were in much demand. According to the University of British Columbia student newspaper in 1958, "One Mrs. Cox, who runs a costume supply shop in town, states she has only one Santa Claus suit in stock and that she has had to raise the rental price from $6.50 to $7.50" (Ubyssey 1958: 5). Today, yak tails remain a valuable commodity; costumes for the Orcs, characters in the *Lord of the Rings* films, were made of yak hair, and Santa Claus beards made of white yak tails fetch upwards of US$ 300.

to "open" a region, route, or border ignore the fact that the territory has almost never been completely "closed" to actual inhabitants living and trading in the area.

This chapter lays out the historical background to the political, social, and economic climate along the trade route between Lhasa, Kalimpong, and Kathmandu, and is supplemented by ethnographic accounts from older traders who were operating prior to and just after the closing of Nathu-la in 1962. The chapter does not provide detailed accounts of the numerous complicated events throughout Sino-Indo-Nepali history; rather, it focuses on several snapshots of specific moments in the history of the trade route that are significant to the rest of the dissertation, moments that raise questions about competing spatial representations, social mobility, and the strategic directionality of trade. These snapshots take place during roughly three periods. First, I discuss the desire of the British to map the Himalayas as an adjunct of India and to "open" the Chumbi Valley in Tibet for trade between the late 18th-early 20th centuries. Second, I outline the peak and decline of the Tibetan wool trade, the resulting stratification of traders, and the narratives of traders who experienced the introduction of new kinds of transport along the trade route in the mid-20th century. Finally, I examine the re-routing of the Tibet-India trade through Nepal after the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, as well as a ghost story that appears to link border disputes from the past with the more contemporary drive to increase Sino-Indian border trade.

Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate how the intertwining of economic and geopolitical strategies is a major part of the larger historical picture. Trade cannot be studied as a phenomenon in isolation from state policies, and neither can the practices and lives of traders, which often reveal a very different trajectory from those very

policies. A trade route is never simply "there," displaying a simple, recognizable shape over the course of centuries; groups of people may follow the same paths, but there will always be more than one route or conception of the route being forged at a time. Following Don Mitchell's (1996) work on how migrants created the California landscape, I show how the Himalayan landscape has always been produced by people. This is a dynamic story of fixity and movement; of the establishment of trade restrictions by state powers, and how various competing parties respond by maneuvering around them. I hope to show, through historical accounts, "the dynamic connections between political powers and geographical knowledges of different sorts" (Harvey 2001: 233).

Mapping the Himalayas: **British Designs on Tibet, Late 18th-Early 20th Centuries**

Tibet has often been portrayed by Western travelers and scholars as a remote, otherworldly, and inaccessible "blank" on a map. Even in the March 2008 media reports on anti-Chinese unrest in Tibet, the region was depicted as only very recently opening up to the outside world.[18] Tibet has, however, been part of a vibrant network of inter-Asian caravan routes ever since the seventh century,[19] when Indian scholars introduced Buddhist texts to Central Asia and China, and pilgrimage routes paralleled the tributaries of what is now considered by historians to have been the northern Silk Route (Klimburg 1982: 33). Rather than a single "road," these numerous trading and information networks ramified in several directions: textiles and gems came from northern China, tea arrived in

[18] See for instance, "In Remote China, Tibetans Break Silence" (Anna 2008) and "Why is Remote Tibet of Strategic Significance?" (Reuters 2008).
[19] Tibetan musk was traded between India and the Roman Empire, according to Christopher Beckwith (1977).

the form of bricks from Yunnan, raisins from Khotan, seashells from south India, and pashmina shawl wool from Ladakh.[20]

Although trade has risen and fallen throughout inner Asia over the centuries, it peaked significantly in the early to mid-17th centuries, when, as Luce Boulnois has noted, trans-Himalayan trade coincided with several geopolitical factors; in particular, the rise of Mogul India and the establishment of Western maritime powers such as the Dutch East India company (Boulnois 2003: 135; 137). In 1642 the 5th Dalai Lama "presided over a large Tibetan state from Kham to Ladakh and the development of Lhasa as the administrative, religious, and commercial capital." Meanwhile, the rise of the Moguls made the Malla kingdoms of Nepal prosperous; they acted as middlemen for trade between India and Tibet (Boulnois 2003: 138).

The British East India Company became interested in Tibet in the late 18th century, around the same time they began to lose control over their imperial maritime ventures. As they started to lose their grip on trade by sea, they were forced to think about a locational shift in economic tactics; the East India Company thus began to move away from the ports and specialize in overland textile trade through the "blank" areas of inner Asia (Arrighi 1994: 246). When the Gurkha conquest of Nepal shut off trade between Tibet and India in 1769, the company made an explicit move to introduce British commodities such as Manchester textiles and Indian indigo to the potential new market of China via the "back door" of Tibet (Cammann 1970: 144-145).

The task, then, was for the British to explore the "the nature of the road between the borders of Bengal and Lhasa" in aiding their economic and territorial expansion

[20] For some fascinating lists and descriptions of Tang Dynasty trade goods, see Edward Schafer's book, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T'ang Exotics* (1985).

(Bishop 1989: 82). In 1774, Warren Hastings (governor-general of British India from 1773 to 1785) asked George Bogle, the first British envoy to Tibet and Bhutan, to send a team to investigate. Bogle was given a list of items to procure, including pashmina goats, two yaks, walnuts, rhubarb, ginseng, and any animals that he happened to find "remarkably curious" (Bishop 1989: 30). According to Peter Bishop's account of the history of Western spatial representations of Tibet, whilst Tibet had a general location in the British imagination (somewhere between China, India, and Central Asia) at that time, it had very little shape (Bishop 1989: 30). Bogle's initial meetings in Tibet were short-lived, partly due to his untimely death by drowning, but British interest in "opening" up Tibet for commercial purposes was taken up again a century later. Echoing earlier trade reports from the East India Company, Francis Younghusband, the leader of the 1904 British invasion of Tibet, recalled that in 1873, "…besides tea, the Bengal Government thought that Manchester and Birmingham goods and Indian indigo would find a market in Tibet, and that we should receive in return much wool, sheep, cattle, walnuts, Tibetan cloths, and other commodities" (Younghusband 1910).

Hand in hand with the need to gain knowledge over the flora and fauna of the "unknown" region beyond the existing British empire was the need to create a uniform, structured survey of the territory; to "know" India, minus its diverse specificities (Edney 1997: 324). But as Michael Taussig reminds us about the practice of mapping, "what seems crucial here is what this tells us about the state; how it needs this theater with its magic, but needs it disguised as science, and how important the domination of nature is to such theater" (Taussig 2004: 198). In other words, the exploration and cartographic

representation of Tibet often tells us more about the establishment of the shape of the British empire than it does about the physical landscape of the region.

Although 19th century exploration and geographical mapping of the Himalayas through the British Great Trigonometric Survey is already widely documented, I will refer to it here briefly, as cartographic knowledge is often an elite and uneven form of power.[21] The Himalayas, as a major part of the Survey, began to be seen as connected to India and therefore came to be viewed as a "rational" part of the British geography (Bishop 1989: 89). Attempting to attach Tibet to the map of British India, motivated in part by British fears of Russian expansion during the period known as the "Great Game," the British colonial authorities harnessed local spatial knowledge, ironically mapping the "new world by erasing local histories" that were dependent on "local knowledges" (Pickles 2003: 119).

In 1863, the Royal Geographical Society clandestinely trained and sent out Indian and Sikkimese surveyors into Tibet (central Tibet followed an isolationist policy in the 19th century, not allowing foreigners into its territory). The surveyors were disguised as traders and given special mapping instruments that had to be concealed; Buddhist prayer beads, for instance, were used while the surveyors walked along, pretending to murmur mantras for each bead counted. Although they normally have 108 beads, an auspicious Buddhist number, the British instruments were made with 100 beads so that they could measure paces evenly. Prayer wheels, instead of having scriptures inside, would have slips of paper so that one could record compass bearings. Compass and field-books were to "look as 'un-English as possible,'" and mercury was inserted into coconuts in order to

[21] For an excellent, detailed historical account of the mapping of India, see Matthew Edney's *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843* (1997).

clandestinely measure altitude (Madan 2004: 95). According to members of the Royal Geographical Society, the pundits' "labours, if successful, will make to our present stock of Geographical and general knowledge of the vast unexplored countries which lie between India, China and Russia in Asia, most important" (Madan 2004: 143).[22]

The establishment of British Trade Marts in Tibet provides another example of the close relationship between early 20th century British geopolitical strategy and economic advancement. Soon after the Survey was completed, an official note stating that the Russians might also want to trade with Tibet was the immediate excuse for the invasion of Tibet led by Francis Younghusband in 1904 (Cammann 1970: 147). The invasion was accompanied by the rhetoric of "opening up" of the Chumbi Valley (the valley between present day Sikkim and Tibet) for trade, as if there was nothing there before. "Opening up," contrary to its connotation of unimpeded, unrestricted mobility, went hand in hand with the signing of a number of trade treaties in order to establish British trade marts in the Tibetan towns of Gyantse, Gartok, and Yatung, and the demarcation of boundaries between Sikkim and Tibet.[23] However, "the inhabitants were so angry they kept destroying the border markers, and trade happened anyway despite the restrictions" (Bell 2000: 61). According to Younghusband's account:

> The "Chief Steward," the sole Commissioner on the part of the Tibetan Government for reporting on the frontier matter, "made the important

[22] After his lengthy journeys into Tibet, one pundit, Nain Singh, was simply presented with a gold watch from the Royal Geographical Society in 1868 [the typical gift of a time-keeping device from a boss to employees is noted in EP Thompson's *Time, Work-Discipline, and Capitalism* (Thompson 1967: 70)]. Singh's watch was subsequently stolen, and upon hearing of this loss, rather than replacing it, JT Walker simply remarked, "But he will always retain the honour of having won it" (Madan 2004: 147). However, Geographical Society members were not always in agreement with this kind of subordinate treatment of the pundits. TG Montgomerie, for instance, former Deputy Superintendent of the Great Trig Survey, wrote in 1877, "Nain Singh's explorations have been such that had they been made by a European, they would undoubtedly have received a handsome acknowledgement from his own Government, as well as from all foreign countries interested in Geography" (Madan 2004: 144).

[23] I barely skim the surface of the history of the British in Tibet; for more detailed historical accounts, see Alex McKay's publications, including *Tibet and the British Raj: The Frontier Cadre 1904-1947* (1997).

> statement that the Tibetans did not consider themselves bound by the Convention with China, as they were not a party to it." He reported further, that the Tibetans had prevented the formation of a mart by building a wall across the valley on the farther side of Yatung, by efficiently guarding this and by prohibiting their traders from passing through. Mr. Korb, a wool merchant from Bengal, had come to Yatung to purchase wool from some of his correspondents on the Tibetan side, who had invited him thither; but the Tibetans prevented his correspondents from coming to do business with him [Younghusband 1910].

In a 1930 guidebook for British tourists to Tibet, David MacDonald discusses a similar incident:

> When the milestones were first erected on the Phari-Gyantse road, the local people invariably destroyed them, alleging they were gods put up by the British to destroy their faith. Only after many years did this belief die out, and even at the present time some of these cairns can be seen scattered over the plain [MacDonald 1999: 102].

Although the "gods" accusation is difficult to verify, this incident clearly points to local attitudes towards the construction of the British version of the trade route. British authorities complained that the "imposing of free trade [was] rather difficult because Tibetans *were used to their own form of trade rules*" (Bell 2000: 256, my emphases). The trade agencies also doubled as administrative units; David MacDonald, a trade officer in Tibet for nearly 20 years, wrote of his duties in Yatung, which "consisted of administering the Trade Mart, caring for the interests of British subjects trading in Tibet, and watching and forwarding reports on the political situation to the Government of India" vis-à-vis China (MacDonald 2005: 52-53). Although somewhat cut off from British strategic headquarters in England and India, the British trade agencies (which became Indian trade agencies in 1947 and formally continued with Chinese control over communication operations in 1954) operated in Tibet until the Sino-Indian border war in 1962 (McKay 1997: 219). All of these strategic actions – the establishment of trade

agencies, boundaries, trade treaties, and new roads – were intended to facilitate "free" trade for the British while restricting the movement of existing traders in the region. Despite these restrictions, however, traders continued to go about their daily activities, even if it meant destroying border markers or redirecting their trade journeys around such limitations.

The Peak & Decline of the Wool Trade, 1920s-1962: Big and Small Traders

In a teashop in Lhasa, I had a conversation with a woman in her eighties who used to work as a merchant in a store on the Barkor (the main pilgrimage – and shopping – circuit in Lhasa) while her father and other male family members led mule caravans between Lhasa and Kalimpong. The woman said she was from a small trading family,[24] and insisted rather seriously that "selling wool is very dangerous. Because if you have good luck, you will be very rich, but if not, you will be broke." The Tibetan term she used for "broke" was *rkub rdib*, which literally translates into English as "your ass has collapsed." Traders in the 1940s were subject to huge risks in the transport of wool; not only was its quality dependent on weather conditions (heavy rains along the trade route could ruin a whole caravan-load of wool), but trading caravans were also common targets for thieves, as they would often be carrying items of value. The elderly woman remembered one story about the risks involved:

[24] People in Lhasa, Kalimpong, and Kathmandu often referred to themselves and others in Tibetan, English, or Nepali as "small" or "big" traders (or more rarely, "medium sized"). Generally, the small traders are those who maintain a living by exchanging goods within a relatively local radius, and large traders are those who are tapped into more distant international networks (but who are not necessarily more mobile). I will return to this big-small geographical distinction in Chapters Three and Five.

> In the countryside, on the way to Chushul [see Figure 10], some of the *bdal ring* [muleteers who took long journeys] would have goods stolen. One iron trunk had 16 boxes of candies in it. The *rku ma* [thieves] put stones in the boxes instead. They stole cotton, too, and because the outside of the cotton was tied in a bundle, they pulled out the cotton goods in the middle. If you aren't careful with calculating everything in your possession…When you get to Lhasa, you must not lose anything or get anything stolen.

Although the majority of traders often had much to risk, a few Tibetan families were able to establish far-reaching, successful trade networks in the early 20th century. Fernand Braudel, in his account of capitalism and economy in Europe, showed how increases in the circulation of capital led to increased divisions among traders, producing a hierarchy of small and large traders. As trading elites grew more and more prosperous, they became an aristocracy (Braudel 1982: 68). In Lhasa, the three main trading families - Pangdatsang, Reting, and Sadhutsang – constituted such an aristocracy.[25] All were originally from Kham, in eastern Tibet (current-day Sichuan, Yunnan, and Qinghai Provinces), and grew to obtain exclusive contracts with wool purchasers in the United States and Europe.[26] Charles Bell, Political Officer of Sikkim, writes, "during my time in Tibet [1920-1921] the chief Tibetan merchant was a man named pom-da-tsang [Pangdatsang]. He had branches in Calcutta, Shanghai, Peking, and Japan. He exported mainly wool – but yak tails, too" (Bell 1928: 130). Similarly, one member of a medium-scale trading family who lived in Yatung spoke about the three main families in the 1950s:

> These families had trade stations in Changtang [the nomadic shepherding area in Northern Tibet], like district offices. Pangdatsang members were so wealthy they even had their own private banks in Kalimpong, and they even

[25] Carole McGranahan's excellent dissertation, *Arrested Histories*, details the rise and fall of the Pangdatsang family.

[26] The families' names were commonly abbreviated and mentioned jointly as "Re Pa Sam" (*re spom ga gsum*, McGranahan 2002:104) While talking to some older traders, I heard that a major American car manufacturer had signed contracts with the Pangdatsangs to use Tibetan wool in their automobile mats.

had a factory that separated the wool into different qualities, into white and black, which were then packaged for export.



Figure 7. Mule caravan loaded with Tibetan wool, near Phari (?), circa 1930s. Photo taken by KC Pyne, Kodak Stores, Kalimpong



Figure 8. Traders on the main road of Kalimpong, circa 1930s. Photo taken by KC Pyne, Kodak Stores, Kalimpong.

Until Indian independence in 1947, the British-appointed trade agents in Tibet kept diaries, summaries of which were reported annually to the British Indian government. Most entries are rather dull, marking the visits of British and Tibetan officials, noting miscreants who cut down the telegraph wires, listing prices of wool and tobacco, but they also provide telling indications of the economic divisions between the monopolizing trading families and their less wealthy counterparts. In 1944, Sonam Tobden, the Tibetan agent stationed in Yatung, wrote:

> The three prominent Tibetan traders have brought sufficient wool in Tibet and are now transporting them [loads of wool] to Kalimpong. Most of the petty traders had to sell their wool at low price at Phari owing to the scarcity of transport animals. They suffered heavy losses in the wool trade as they have paid higher price for wool in inner Tibet.

And in 1946, Tobden recorded:

> The big Tibetan traders who have godowns (warehouses) at their disposal at Phari and Kalimpong for the storage of the wool managed to earn much more money than the petty Tibetan traders who have no such godowns. Added to this, the petty traders who usually resort to borrowing large portion of their capital at usurious rates of interest were unable to hold their wool for a considerable length of period even when there was good prospect of substantial increase of the price of wool in the near future.

The local petty traders and merchants were clearly frustrated with corrupt middlemen and elite traders taking advantage of them, as also indicated by an anonymous letter addressed to the Secretary, Foreign Affairs Dept, New Delhi in 1946. The author writes that:

> Tibetan merchants who get permits of goods at Kalimpong resell them at double or trible [sic] prices to people who take these goods down to India and sell them at very high prices to Indian people. Thus huge black marketing is being done and any appeal to the local authorities is proving fuitile [sic] because the local officials at Kalimpong and other places are cooperating with the black marketeers and in spite of specific instances being given no drastic

> action has been taken. The public suffers and these highly-placed plotters are becoming enormously rich.

It doesn't seem that the British had paid much heed to this letter, as a handwritten note is attached to the document, stating that "were all these allegations true, which I very much doubt, there is nothing we can do with an anonymous letter."

If the elite trading families had the monopoly on the wool trade in the 1940s, however, their position was made a bit more precarious by the Revolution in China. By the time the Communist Chinese troops entered central Tibet in 1950, the wool trade was already badly affected by the halt in sales to the United States, as the US began to cut off all economic ties with China and Chinese territories. According to a 1951 *New York Times* article:

> It is learned from trading circles that an estimated 1,600,000 pounds of wool have been stockpiled here [in Kalimpong] against the season's normal anticipated import of 8,000,000 pounds. Out of this, nearly 2,000,000 pounds will not arrive from Kham in Eastern Tibet, which is now under control of Chinese Communists [*The New York Times*, 1951a].

The Tibetan economy being tightly integrated with the Indian economy at this time, the Chinese occupation led to rapid geo-economic transformations on different spatial scales (Shakya 1999: 115).[27] As the US cut off economic ties with China, the big traders who held monopolies on wool quickly lost most of their profits and bales of wool totaling 4 million pounds lay rotting in Kalimpong warehouses. At the same time, however, small-scale traders suddenly experienced a boom in business. The beginnings of Chinese rule in the early 1950s led to a thriving business for many traders; not least because certain products from India (for example, watches, surgical instruments, and nail

[27] "Old documents in the Kalimpong sub-divisional office show that trade ties between India and Tibet were so close that three Kalimpong-based private banks - Kuber Bank, Das Bank and a third bank that belonged to Rai Bahadur Ramchandra Mintry - operated in Tibet till the early 1950s" (Chaudhari 2003: 18).

clippers) were much desired by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers stationed in Lhasa (Radhu 1997: 248). In 1950 in Lhasa, Chinese soldiers were said to be "avid shoppers," buying watches and fountain pens, bringing in Chinese silver coins (*da yuan*) by the truckload (Tuladhar 2004: 92-93). There was in fact a huge (illicit) trade in Chinese Kuomintang silver coins to India at the time. As the coins were phased out in China, they were taken to India to be sold and melted down, since the silver content in the coins was worth more than the coins themselves. Mule caravans from Tibet were said to arrive in India nearly empty (except sometimes for the coins), but would be loaded up to return with Indian textiles, cigarettes, and sweets, leading businessmen to state that "if the present slump in Indo-Tibetan trade continues Kalimpong can be written off as the most important trade center" (*The New York Times* 1951b).

The Chinese were quickly able to direct the Tibetan economy towards Beijing; the State Bank of China in Tibet, which offered loans free of interest for traders and businesspeople, was established in 1952, and PLA-built roads were completed in 1953 (Shakya 2000: 135). The US market, which usually received around 70% of the annual 8 million pounds of export wool from Tibet, declared that it would not accept any shipments after February 29, 1952. Russians and Czechs then began to buy Tibetan wool, and China stepped in to purchase all 8 million pounds of surplus wool "to help the Tibetan government tide over the current financial crisis caused by a slump in wool trade" (*The New York Times* 1952). TN Sherpa, of the Tibetan Traders Association, took over all the individually owned warehouses.

As the wool supply from the nomadic areas of central and northern Tibet down to India was nearly cut off, the direction of the trade reversed quite dramatically for a few

years; what had primarily been a north-south trajectory became a south-north one. Wangchuk's story exemplifies the eve of the shift. A man in his sixties who lived in the trading town of Yatung, Wangchuk brought *rgya zog* (sugar, textiles, food, literally "Indian goods" in the Tibetan language) to Tibet and wool down to India in the 1950s:

> You can buy many things from foreign countries – mostly Europe – in India and bring them up to Tibet. By 1955 there were roads in Dromo [Yatung/*Gro mo*], and from 1951, the Chinese army really needed supplies. Much of these came through Dromo and from that year on, business became bigger, and the town became wealthier. When I went to Beijing in 1956, I thought it wasn't developed at all, and I was surprised at how poor Beijing was compared to Dromo. The three big families had a federation, an association for businessmen (Cn., *she hui*). Before 1951, you didn't need a permit to travel back and forth between Tibet and India, but from 1951 onwards you needed a permit; still, it was very easy to travel. It took 13 days from Shigatse to Kalimpong, and it took 17 days from Lhasa to Kalimpong.[28]

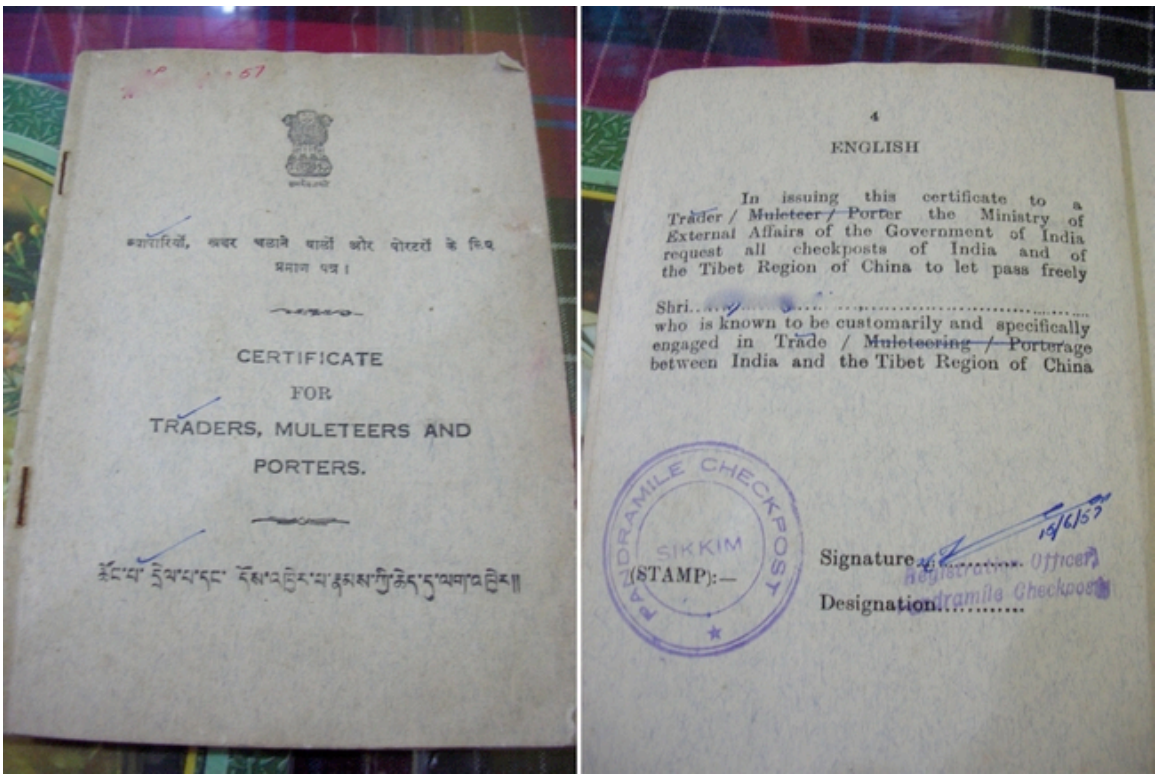


Figure 9. A trading permit from 1957. Note that the three languages in use at the time were Hindi, English, and Tibetan.

[28] According to the former traders that I spoke with, the travel time from Lhasa to Kalimpong (on mules) ranged from 14 days to 20 days in the early 1950s.

And yet, towards the end of the 1950s – after the crushing of a Tibetan rebellion and the Dalai Lama's decision to leave Tibet in 1959 – traders in India began to feel some of the adverse effects of the Chinese-directed new economy. Mr. Agarwal, in his mid-eighties, is said to be one of the oldest Marwaris still living in Kalimpong. He used to be the secretary of the Kalimpong Chamber of Commerce, selling ready-made clothes and textiles from Bombay, Surat, and Ahmedabad. He said:

> In 1959 things started to become very difficult, business was very bad. I remember one story of a merchant in Kalimpong holding 100 *do po* [loads] of chubas [traditional Tibetan garments] for someone in Tibet who was supposed to come and barter wool for them, but this happened right around 1959, when things were bad. He waited and waited and the guy never came, he really lost then, he wasn't able to make a profit at all because few people in Kalimpong wanted these things.

At least six traders in India and Tibet have reported that around 1959, "trade virtually stopped." Those who could, migrated to other places, such as Kathmandu, where business was more lucrative. Part of the reason for this was that towards the end of the 1950s, PLA-led road-building projects into Tibet were completed, and supplies no longer needed to come from India. One former trader now living in Kalimpong lamented, "in 1959 everything stopped. In the mid 1950s, the Chinese built roads, and when the roads were made, business went down." In addition, after 1959, Tibetans in Tibet who wished to trade between Tibet and India had to obtain three separate difficult-to-obtain trading permits: one from the Government of India (GOI), one from Sikkim, and one from Kalimpong. He sighed. "In a way, it wasn't worth it."[29]

Changes in Transport: Roads and Motorized Vehicles, 1950s-1960s

[29] Personal communication, October 18, 2006.

A trade route is often conceived of as an unbroken line on a map where commodities are transported from point A to point B. Of course, the route between Lhasa and Kalimpong has never been direct. It has been cut off, elongated, and diverted, and people do not necessarily follow the same path as the products that travel along the route. For instance, when asked about the trade route, Tibetan traders would not speak of it as a simple point A-to-point B route, but instead recite the names of towns along the way. One elderly trader said the following:

> The trade route from Dromo to Lhasa was Dromo, Phari, Dhuena, Khama, Nyero, Gyamo Naga (Ralung), Nagatse, Draknalang, Chu Shue Gang and Lhasa on horse, mule, and yaks. From Dromo to Kalimpong, it was Dromo, Nanga, Zelebla, Kubub, Gnathang, Lingtam, Rhenock, Pedong and to Kalimpong on mules and horses. I liked the fact that my business fetched me good money, but the tiring trek from Chumbi to Kalimpong was something I detested. [30]

[30] It is difficult to standardize place names along the route because they tend to have numerous pronunciations, transliterations, and spellings in English, Tibetan, and Chinese. In Figure 10, I have mapped the town names exactly as the trader wrote them down in English. However, other names or spellings that are commonly used are as follows: Kubub (Eng. Kupup), Zelebla (Eng. Jelep la), Nanga (Tib. *nags ra*?), Yadong (Eng. Yatung, Tib. *gro mo*, Cn. Yadong), Phari (Tib. *phag ri*, Cn. Pali), Dhuena (Eng. Tuna, Tib. *dud sna*, Cn. Duina), Khama (Eng. Khangmar, Tib. *khang dmar*, Cn. Kangma), Nyero (Eng. Nyeru, Tib. *nye ru*, Cn. Nieru), Gyamo Naga (Eng. Ralung, Tib. *ra lung*, Cn. Relong), Draknalang (Tib. *brag dkar la*?), Chu shue gang (Eng. Chushul, Tib. *chu shur*, Cn. Qushui). In addition, two of these place names – Nanga and Draknalang – are possibly the names of mountain passes, not towns. As mentioned below, this kind of representation of the route demonstrates one of the many different ways that traders fix trade routes, not to mention the historical and political significance of using the Tibetan place names instead of the more recent Chinese ones.

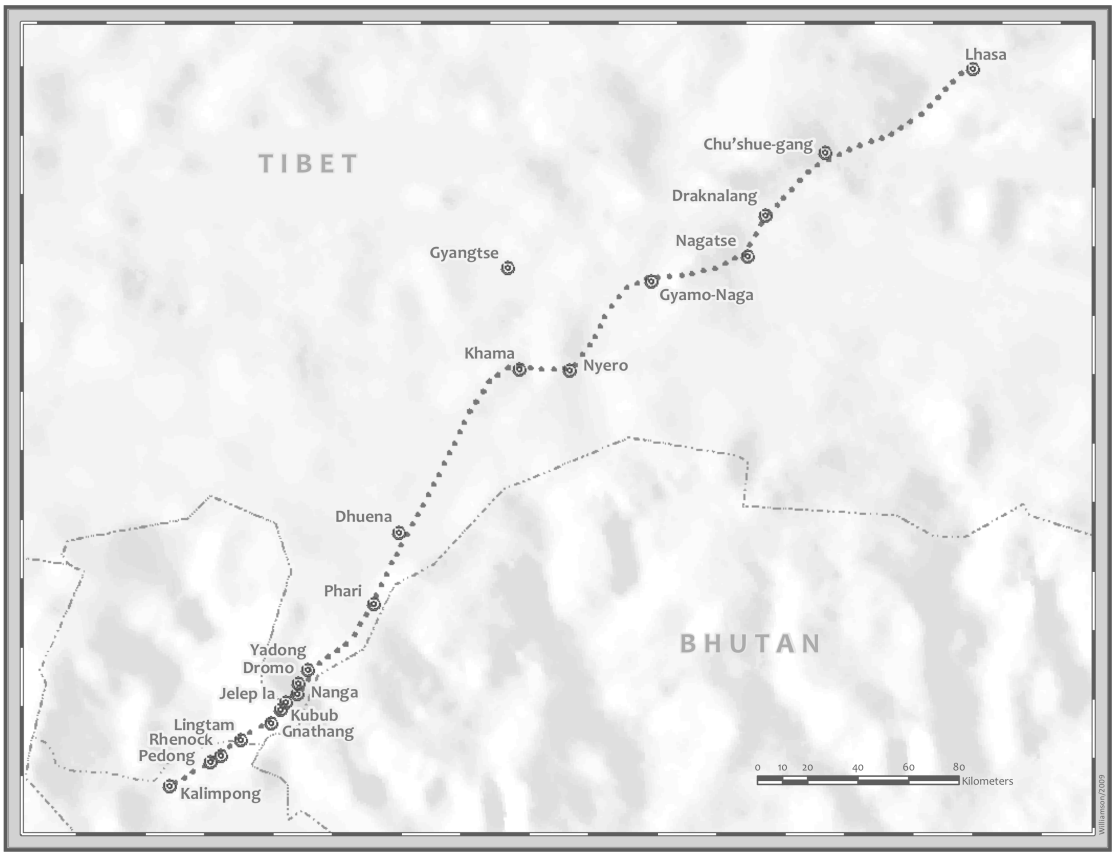


Figure 10. Map of the caravan route described by a Tibetan trader, remembered from his journeys in the early 1950s

One of the reasons why the route was represented by the trader in this way – from small town to small town – is that the mule caravans were leased and loaded in stages. There was more risk of tiredness, injury, or deaths amongst the animals if they had to travel the entire route; moreover, those who leased out the animals could make a good profit while remaining in the town. Moreover, not a single trader remembered the landmarks along the route in exactly the same way, further exemplifying the variety of ways that traders "make" routes. In Figure 10, for example, some of the names that were given were not immediately identifiable on a map or in a gazetteer of Chinese place names, and may in fact be the names of mountain passes.

Many Tibetan traders remembered motorized vehicles first appearing along the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route in the mid- to late 1950s. Because crossing the high-altitude Himalayan mountain passes is quite treacherous, and the roads little more than craggy mountainside mule paths in many areas, there was no way for motorized vehicles to be driven over the mountains to the other side. Instead, trucks would transport the traders and their goods only as far as Phari on the Tibetan side, and only up to Kalimpong on the Indian side. As another elderly trader recalled:

> From 1955 trucks slowly came into the picture, though only as far as Phari, and then mules would take the load the rest of the way. Much of the Tashilhumpo (Shigatse) loads were taken by *ther ka* [a horse or mule-drawn cart], in caravans of 20 to 30. In 1957-58 trucks were more common in Phari.

Again, the divisions in wealth between small and large trading groups during this time were felt acutely. One woman in her late seventies said that although there were more roads and cars connecting Lhasa to other towns in Tibet from 1957 onwards, "the bigger families, like the Tsarongs, had cars before then."[31] They would take horses and mules over the passes, but then the cars would take them down to Kalimpong. One favorite recollection of many elderly traders was the method of transporting cars from the ports in Calcutta to Siliguri and then over the passes to Lhasa. One of the traders, a Muslim man who worked for the Newar Bhajuratna/Syamukapu trading company, remembered transporting the vehicles to Lhasa. His account of reassembling vehicle parts includes a comparison of two of the wealthiest Tibetan trading families from mid-20th century Tibet with two of the biggest Indian families who have had the monopoly over the steel, textile, cement, and auto-making industries in India since the late 1800s.

[31] The Tsarongs were an elite Lhasan family, well known for their influence and involvement in early 20th century Tibetan politics.

> The car would be in different pieces. Until early in 1958, that was the way we were doing it. From Siliguri, they would have it [the car] in small pieces. They would buy a lorry from Siliguri in different pieces. Some pieces were for the mules and some for the humans to transport, up to Phari. From Phari, we had a little bit of transportation up to Shigatse. The roads were not so good, dirt roads. We would assemble the cars [on the other side]. They were getting 8000 Indian rupees to assemble the cars. Both Sadhutsang and Pangdatsang, the biggest, richest Tibetans, were doing that [with the cars]. But Bhajuratna, they would take some loans, they would ask Sadhutsang and Pangdatsang for loans. Yes, they are like the Indian Tata-Birla. They are the Tibetan Tata-Birlas! (laughs).

The stratification of traders is marked by their different kinds of trading geographies; despite all the political changes in the mid-twentieth century, the wealthy Pangdatsangs and Sadhutsangs, who lost a fair amount of their wool trading profits at the beginning of Chinese rule in Tibet, maintained links with suppliers in Calcutta, then sold – and owned – automobiles as they became more popular in Lhasa.

As might be expected, the advent of air transportation ended up isolating many traders because it was costly (van Spengen 2000: 193). For example, a former trader who used to sell goods in Kalimpong from 1956 to 1958 bought his supplies in Calcutta. Although he was able to transport his commodities by plane during this time, this was an option limited to only the wealthiest traders or those who were well connected with those in the transport industry. He took an airplane from Calcutta to Siliguri, and would sit in the cargo area with the luggage, which cost 75 Rupees per person. "Back then," he said, "there were no customs, no restrictions; you could buy things as you pleased, no one checked anything. After that, everything changed. Kalimpong changed."

Major shifts in political control in China and India during the mid-twentieth century did not result in sudden, parallel changes in trading practices for all those involved. Instead, factors such as technological transformations in transport seemed to

make more of an impact on the direction and practices of trade; as access to new modes of transport was limited to those traders with far-flung business connections and wealth, stratification between "big" and "small" traders grew wider in the late 1950s. A few years later, the sealing of the border immediately following the 1962 Sino-Indian war turned out to be another momentous event that led to crucial geographical and social shifts in trade. Although I do not discuss the geopolitical history of the war in any detail, what I find especially significant is how the closing of an international border becomes entangled in the contradictory rhetoric of state security and free trade, making visible the complex tensions between fixity and mobility on a national scale. The next section addresses these tensions through a ghost story that ties anxieties associated with the past events of the closing of the Sino-Indian border to plans for the future reopening of the border.

The Border Baba and the Haunting of the State: Post-1962 Pasts and Presents

Geopolitical tensions on the boundaries of India and China built up steadily between the late 1950s and early 1960s. Following the Chinese government's repression of a Tibetan uprising and the exile of the Dalai Lama in 1959, the Sino-Indian border war in 1962 cut off nearly all trade between India and Tibet. With the tightening of the military presence, India withdrew its trade agencies in Yatung, Gartok, and Gyantse, while China withdrew its trade representatives from Kalimpong and Calcutta. Trading between China and India effectively "stopped," and the well-worn Himalayan passes of Jelep-la and Nathu-la fell into disuse (Maxwell 1970: 235). At this point, many Indian traders who had shops in Tibet were given 24 hours notice to leave; one current Marwari

trader remembers this sudden economic upheaval when he was a child in Sikkim and his father had a shop in Yatung. He began by discussing how the mule trains left MG Marg (one of the main roads in Gangtok) at 3am for Yatung with four 40 kg packets of grains on each mule, but when the pass closed on June 2, 1962, "whatever they had, they had to bring back in bulk to Gangtok." Other traders recalled similar stories, emphasizing the disruption of daily life. One man remarked, "I found out about it [the pass closing] on 1 June and was able to leave, but other traders who stayed past that date were forced to leave within 24 hours." Another former trader currently living in Kalimpong said, "From 1962 business completely stopped, and the border was sealed on both sides. We moved here, to Kalimpong, in 1962. At that time, businesspeople spread everywhere."

Since there seemed to be no imminent future for trade with China through the Sikkim routes, many trading families also headed to Kathmandu, where they had relatives or business partners. Trade between Tibet and India slowly began to build up again along the diverted route through Nepal toward Kodari, on the Tibet border. In fact, the Nepali King Mahendra had visited Peking as early as 1961 and received a blueprint for a road linking Nepal and China. Committed to creating a route fit for trucks, Nepal employed 12,000 Nepali farmers (and 50 Chinese engineers) to build the Kodari road and the "Friendship Bridge," enabling cross-border trade by 1964.

> Replying to Indian charges that the Kodari Road would give strategic advantages to the Chinese Communists, [King] Mahendra argued that the highway would be *strictly an economic link*; his aim was to revive the *ancient trade route* to Tibet and restore for Nepal her onetime status as entrepot for the Central Asian hinterland…
>
> …'The Chinese will get everything from us,' said a [less optimistic] trader at Barabise, a center about 12 miles south of the border at Kodari. 'They are already getting a lot of our rice, maize and other grains, tobacco, cigarettes, sugar, matchboxes, oil, soap, biscuits, textiles. We get in return only wool

> and musk, for which there is no market, some salt and sheep. Nepal can't buy a thing she needs. The benefit is all theirs' [*The New York Times* 1964, my emphases].

The dynamics of the establishment, disruption, and subsequent rerouting of trade routes is hardly a fluid process. When talking to traders today, their memories of 1962 involve the violence of the sudden upheaval of daily life: the despair of having to pack up and leave a family shop in Yatung, concerns over the buildup of armed forces in towns along the borders, and the frustration with the uneven distribution of commodities, as outlined by the trader above. So it was not surprising that when the Sino-Indian border reopened after 44 years, a ghost story that was wrought by the geopolitical tensions and violence of 1962 floated back up to the surface.

Some time prior to the 2006 reopening of the Tibet-Sikkim trade route through Nathu-la, stories of the mysterious "Border Baba"[32] began to reemerge as journalists searched for interesting angles to supplement their reports on the history of the Sino-Indian border region. The stories, in brief, go something like this. On October 4th, 1968, Sepoy Harbhajan Singh, a member of the 23rd battalion of the Punjab Regiment and stationed on Nathu-la, fell into a stream and drowned while leading a mule caravan along the ridges of the mountainous borderlands. Soon after his death, members of the Indian army began seeing his ghost appear in their dreams, mounted on a grey horse. The Baba's sheets were supposedly left crumpled each morning, and some army members who drifted off to sleep while on duty claimed to be awakened after being slapped by him. Today, troops still transport his belongings from Sikkim to his village in Punjab for his annual leave on September 14th, and there is a small shrine dedicated to the Baba.

[32] "Baba" is a term of respect in Urdu/Hindi, often used for holy men.

According to current members of the Indian army, soldiers on both the Indian and Chinese sides of Nathu-la and Jelep-la claim that the Baba will give them 72 hours warning if any untoward incident is to take place on the border (Thomas 2002: 53).



Figure 11. The Border Baba's bed, at Baba Mandir, Sikkim. Photo by Ashok Chavda

A recent newspaper article concerning the Border Baba quotes his sister-in-law, Bibi Satya Kaur, as saying:

> Baba was of the belief that the two nations should encourage harmony between them, however, he was opposed to giving a 'free pass' to any country…When a road was sought by the Chinese, Baba refused, saying this is not to be given, contending any incident can take place [Robin 2006].

Similarly, Balwinder Singh, Baba's nephew, has said that even "the soldiers on the other side say that they've seen Babaji on a grey horse. He calls for maintaining love and peace with Chinese, but advises on not giving away anything."

Originally, I did not wish to give much meaning to the various ghostly stories that I heard during my fieldwork in the Himalayas, so I put the Border Baba stories away in a file. However, there is something that might be said about such narratives expressing uneasy encounters in border regions. In this case, they serve as a reminder of the history of political violence that has affected communities spanning the borders of India and China, bringing to the forefront more than the one-sided celebratory story of re-opening the border for free trade in 2006. While the news about reopening the pass was saturating the media, the army members' ghost stories drew attention to the difficulties of life for troops in high altitude regions, and the Baba's family demonstrated their wariness of stronger Indian ties with China; not wanting to "give away anything." The story of the Border Baba is thus a reminder that these examples of everyday life in the borderlands (be it the worry that China is "flooding" India with goods, or by environmental destruction) reveal more complicated relationships with the often intangible but still very present state. Perhaps we need to take ghosts more seriously, then, for "to be haunted is to be tied to social and historical effects" (Gordon 1997: 190).

In fact, to talk about the past is never to replicate exactly what happened. It is more about "seiz[ing] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (Taussig 2004: 368). This notion of "danger" is apt here, for despite all the talk of the Baba encouraging harmony between the two states, there might be a more sinister reason why he is evoked. His simultaneously protective and harbinger-like presence (or non-

presence, for that matter) articulates a fearful discourse of the potentialities of the state - the fear of China and fear of India, and the fear of future violence that might burst forth at their seams. The stories of the ghostly Border Baba merge the violence of the past into the present and future by providing reminders of the 1962 border war ("Be careful, it could happen again!"), and even the military home-leave as a vestige of British colonial rule. In so doing, they confirm the hegemonic presence of nation-states and borders. At the same time, the Baba's haunting presence disrupts the apparent seamlessness of free trade at Nathu-la between India and China, at least from the Indian side, for he has the power to refuse road-building projects or to warn the local inhabitants of any impending danger. As Taussig has noted, "death mediates the spirit of the state with the body of the people" (Taussig 1997: 103).

The point in this chapter is not to provide a detailed history of trade in the Himalayas, but to pick out specific moments of this history to be used as a basis for analyzing later spatiotemporal shifts in trading relations. Of special importance has been to show the uneven experiences of "opening" and "closing" routes and borders on the part of different kinds of traders, for these are uncannily similar to what traders experienced with the opening of Nathu-la in 2006. Although the most powerful economic players changed between the late 18th century and now, the movement of traders remained dynamic, both thwarting and following, fixing and transgressing a hegemonic capitalist geography. The next chapter, "Silk Roads and Wool Routes," will examine how traders are involved in the making of trading places in 2006, both through the politics of naming the reopened trade route between Tibet and India, and through their lived experiences of the route. In particular, I will examine the controversy between

two groups in Kalimpong – those for and those against the reopening of the Jelep-la mountain pass in addition to Nathu-la.

Chapter Three

Silk Roads and Wool Routes[33]

"What the map cuts up, the story cuts across."[34]



Figure 12. The *Mela* (festival) ground in Kalimpong, 2006

Tsering's Map

It is a clear Sunday afternoon in Kalimpong, a small town of about 43,000 mostly Nepali-speaking inhabitants in the mountainous, northernmost tip of West Bengal.[35] The

[33] Sections of this chapter have been published in a special issue of *India Review* on the relationship between India and Tibet (Harris 2008).
[34] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p. 129.

rhododendrons are glaringly bright against the green foliage and the Himalayas hover on the horizon; it is especially pleasant after months of heavy monsoon rain, moldy clothes, and the sporadic landslides that prevented the delivery of provisions to the local shops for weeks on end. I walk quickly down the hill, past the Mela (festival) ground and the motor stand in the center of town, where shared jeeps are available to other towns in the hill region: to Gangtok, to Kurseong, to Siliguri, to Darjeeling. I am on my way to meet a man named Tsering, someone whom my friend Prakash insists I *must* speak with if I am doing research about the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route.

Tsering is a man in his early sixties, who comes from a long-standing, elite Sikkimese family that was involved in the Lhasa trade in the 1940s and 1950s. Currently active in the hotel and restaurant industry in Kalimpong, he is part of a loosely defined group of merchants, hoteliers, travel agency representatives, and local officials who are lobbying the Indian government to reopen the Jelep-la mountain pass as a supplement to Nathu-la, the Sino-Indian pass only 5 km north of Jelep-la, which was reopened for trade in June 2006.[36] The group argues that the trade route passing through Nathu-la heads straight to Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, bypassing the town of Kalimpong, which was one of the major hubs of Tibetan trade at least until the 1960s. As Jelep-la was the route that was historically utilized regularly for trade, re-opening it, would, in their opinion, provide an impetus to economic activity so that "Kalimpong can regain its lost glory."

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[35] It is worth noting that Kiran Desai's 2007 Booker Prize-winning novel set in Kalimpong, *The Inheritance of Loss*, came under much scrutiny in the region for its negative and condescending portrayal of Nepali-speaking inhabitants in the mostly Bengali-speaking state of West Bengal. As a local lawyer said, "it is a one-sided account that tells you about [Desai's] fears about Kalimpong. The central character Sai is obviously a self-portrait and you can feel her estrangement from this dark, ominous place where Nepalese are just transient interlopers in the landscape" (Ramesh 2006).

[36] As "la" means "mountain pass" in Tibetan, and in order to avoid redundancy, I will henceforth refer to the passes simply as "Nathu-la" or "Jelep-la."

When I was first shown into Tsering's hotel office, I saw him busily poring over three different maps, while trying to draw the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route on a separate sheet of paper, marking the location of both Nathu-la and Jelep-la. I asked him what kind of map he was making. He pointed to one of the official-looking maps, saying that it was "only a Sikkim map," and that it didn't show the rest of North Bengal. He then showed me another map, which depicted all of West Bengal, but only up to the border with Sikkim, and no mountain passes appeared to be labeled. Neither of these maps seemed suitable for his purpose, namely, showing "the Government of India in Delhi the comparison between both routes, so they can see for themselves which one will be better." "There are no good maps!" he sighed.

The Context

The relationship between India and China has been featured regularly in the global media over the past five years or so. Data such as income statistics, GDP, strategic spending, and population percentages are used to compare the rising economies of the two most populous nation-states in Asia. In a joint statement issued by Chinese premier Wen Jiabao and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during Wen Jiabao's visit to India in 2005, bilateral India-China relations were described as a "strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity," the subtext being that such collaboration would also provide thousands of new economic opportunities for Chinese markets and Indian investors (Economic and Political Weekly 2005). These kinds of discussions, while useful from the standpoint of nation-states and international relations, often create a kind of geographical blindspot where India and China – with their political

centers in Beijing and Delhi – seem as if they contain their own exclusive economies and histories (van Schendel 2005: 38). Such completely state-centered perspectives obscure the diverse social and economic realities of those living in the so-called "margins" of India and China.

Anthropologists Michel Baud and Willem van Schendel have suggested that although "there is an extensive literature on how states have dealt with their borderlands," there is not a very developed body of work on "how borderlands have dealt with their states" (Baud and van Schendel 1997: 235). Cultural, linguistic, and trade networks originating in areas on the political edges of China and India such as Tibet, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, Yunnan, Sikkim, and North Bengal have crosscut the two nations long before cartographers and various political powers drew up any boundary lines on a map. One approach that may be used to challenge or reposition geographical representations that derive from state-level discourses is ethnographic research with groups who experience transformations in social and economic life in areas considered at the state level as "frontiers," "borderlands," or "margins." Although tracing the processes and effects of social and economic change is a highly difficult task, pinpointing how spatial understandings of the region are produced on various levels – from the nation-state to individuals living on the margins of the state, for example – may bring us to a closer understanding of how Tibet, China, and India relate to each other as spatial constructs.

This chapter begins to address these issues by examining several discourses over the reopening of a trade route that historically connected Lhasa in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) with Kalimpong in West Bengal via the Jelep-la pass. I start with a

theoretical overview that stresses the importance of looking at transnational mobility across border regions and argue that in addition, a closer examination of how various groups "fix" places is vital to the understanding of how economic change in Tibet, India, and China is experienced. Then, in order to illustrate how new spatial representations of the region are created and anchored in geographical imaginings of the past, I follow with three brief anecdotes based on ethnographic fieldwork. First, I look at contending spatial and temporal discourses over the naming of the reopened Nathu-la trade route. Second, I discuss how two groups – one for and one against the reopening of Jelep-la – both coincide with and struggle against state-centered conceptions of space. Finally, I examine how concerns regarding the marginalization of Kalimpong (as a result of the reopening of Nathu-la) are provoking local businesspeople to make the town more visible through the marketing of local products.

Theoretical Background: Mobility and Fixity in a Globalizing World

A few decades ago, the drive to understand seemingly "new" features of our global economy, such as increased migration of people across borders, flexibility in labor and manufacturing practices, and the transnational movement of cultural icons such as Disney characters and Bollywood stars, fueled much excitement in the social sciences. A flurry of writing appeared in fields like cultural studies and anthropology, detailing the intensifying interconnectedness of societies and economies across the world, where continuously mobile peoples and images were seen as constitutive of contemporary life, and digital technology and the Internet were hailed as providing easier and faster access to worldwide streams of information and knowledge. In particular, theories of

deterritorialization (the "dissolving" or the "erasure" of political and cultural borders) and the "death" of the nation-state pictured the global cultural economy as a "complex, overlapping, disjunctive order" of flows of commodities, people, labor, money, images, and ideas (Appadurai 1991: 296; Clifford 1997).

While scholars continue to subscribe to the idea that communities and nations should not be taken for granted as bounded entities or containers of histories and cultures, a more nuanced view of global mobility and territory has emerged in the social sciences, influenced by the work of historians of global economies and Marxist geographers, as I have outlined in Chapter One. These views, based on the premise that processes of globalization are inherently contradictory and unequal (for instance, where some people, objects, and ideas may move unfettered, others can become hindered as a result) challenge concepts like deterritorialization, which privilege abstract and unobstructed motion across boundaries. In addition, case studies that feature in-depth ethnographic research on transnational social groups such as cross-border traders and migrants (also cited in Chapter One) have been instructive in demonstrating that while mobility is integral to the social and economic lives of those who are part of cross-border networks, borders themselves are by no means obsolete, and in fact, state presence is felt very acutely by these groups in certain situations.

In this chapter, I follow this theoretical trajectory, arguing that the examination of cross-border trading networks might help us better grasp how economic transformations between India, Tibet, and/or China are experienced on a smaller scale. I believe that we must take a step beyond some of the existing literature and investigate how different (and often competing) representations of space are produced by various stakeholders who are

caught up in the rapidly changing economy of the region. More specifically, I argue that in order to do so, we must pay attention to the ways in which spatial mobility and fixity go hand-in-hand. Mobility and flows across borders – whether of finance capital, information, people, or commodities – are always "premised upon various forms of spatial fixity and localization" (Abraham and van Schendel 2005: 58).

Obstacles to trade may also provide opportunities for more high-risk profits, such as through the transport of illicit or restricted goods. New roads and railways, while allowing for the easier and faster movement of goods and people on one level, may simultaneously obstruct, separate, or erase other existing places; the dividing of nomadic pastures, abandonment of other passageways, or relocation of communities are exemplary. Competition over space (not simply in its physical form but also in how it is represented and remembered) results in diverse kinds of "mappings" of the region. For instance, traders may talk in terms of spatial configurations that do not coincide with a nation-based perspective. In other circumstances, however, they will at times use rhetoric that is in accord with that of the "national economies" of India and China and collaborate with states if it seems advantageous. Looking at how and why these mappings – both concrete and abstract – are created may help us understand how Tibet, China, and India (as well as other geographical spaces that may not exist on official maps) figure into the realities of individuals living on the trade route between Tibet and India.

As mentioned in Chapter One, I will depart from the more common anthropological method of centering on a specific ethnic or cultural cross-border trading community (say "Tibetan traders" or "Marwari merchants"). Although I fully agree that

the study of the production, maintenance, and reshaping of ethnic identity across borders is essential for understanding complex regional and political dynamics, I have chosen instead to look at discourses that are threaded along the route of trade itself. The reason for my decision is as follows: trade between Kalimpong and Lhasa has never been restricted exclusively to one ethnic group. Prior to 1962, Marwari moneylenders, elite Tibetan politicians, Newar merchants, and Tibetan Muslim muleteers, although continuing to maintain their community identities in various ways, encountered each other daily within a similar social and economic sphere. Today, although the ethnic and class backgrounds of trading communities along the route may have altered but slightly, diversity is still important; varied stakeholders remain jointly engaged in struggles over the new economic realities of the region. While this approach sacrifices ethnographic depth for spatial breadth, examining perspectives concerning the changing paths of trade may provide us with better insights into how the Himalayan landscape is understood. Furthermore, although transnational trading groups are often characterized by anthropologists as tight-knit communities comprised of a single ethnic minority who were and are somehow located in the margins of nations and therefore set apart from state-based discourses, the situation is more complex than this. Some of these groups may in fact find themselves colluding with "the majority" or vice versa during various struggles over the representation of space. By paying attention to the ways in which these groups continuously reassess and redefine their positions vis-à-vis more powerful entities, we can begin to move beyond simple binaries of "local" versus "global" and "majority" versus "minority" (Katz 1996; Lionnet and Shih 2005). In order to provide more in-depth examples of different spatial and temporal fixings that represent territory

on different scales, for different purposes, I now turn to two stories concerning the recent reopening of the trade route through Nathu-la.

Of Silk Roads and Wool Routes

On July 6, 2006, after 44 years of closure, Nathu-la was officially reopened on a damp and cold day; the ceremony was well attended by Chinese and Indian officials and media representatives.[37] The year 2006, declared by both governments as "India China Friendship Year," marked two major infrastructural events in China and India: the inauguration of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad linking Lhasa with Beijing, and the re-opening of the Nathu-la border crossing between Sikkim and Tibet. From the standpoint of nation-states, these two development schemes are seen as drawing China and India closer together, both geographically and economically. The Chinese government plans to extend the railroad to Shigatse, and later, possibly as far as Yatung, near the Indian border. On the Indian side, money has been set aside to widen the Gangtok-Nathu-la road by 2010. Representatives of both countries talk about opening the full route to tourists by the year 2011 or 2012. Although the majority of recent trade between India and eastern China has been conducted over truck routes through Tibet and Nepal or via maritime routes between the ports of Tianjin and Calcutta, the reopening of Nathu-la has the potential to open up a quick route for Chinese commodities to the port of Calcutta (only 1200 km away), cutting transport times by more than half. Not surprisingly, the combination of accelerating economic development in China and India and new

[37] Several Tibetans pointed out to me that they thought it was no coincidence that Nathu-la was reopened on the Dalai Lama's birthday and that this was possibly a deliberate Chinese attempt to undermine his power.

infrastructural changes has led to the creation of new spatial representations of the regional landscape. I will illustrate one scenario below.

It is difficult to read a newspaper article about the reopening of Nathu-la or to visit North Bengal or Sikkim without noticing multiple references to the revival of the "ancient Silk Road." On a recent trip to the region, for example, I glimpsed several large billboards on the side of Highway 31A (the winding road that leads to the center of Gangtok) sponsored by the Department of Commerce and Industries of the Government of Sikkim to promote the re-opening of Nathu-la. One read: "Once the Silk Route…Now the Road to a Golden Future." Another simply said, "Indo-China Border Trade." In the months building up to the reopening of the pass and immediately thereafter, articles in the Chinese, Indian, and international presses featured headlines such as "Silk Road Revived as Border Pass Reopens After 44 Years" and "History Made as Silk Road is Reopened for Border Trade" (*China Daily* 2006; *India E-News* 2006; Hussain 2006). During an informal conversation with a local official in Sikkim, I noticed that he would often refer to the route between Lhasa and Gangtok as the "ancient" or "traditional" Silk Road. Although a majority of people did not use this phrase, some traders in both Tibet and India shared the opinion that the comparisons between the Nathu-la route and the Silk Road were a bit far-fetched. For instance, one businessman from a former trading family in Kalimpong responded to the media fanfare by stating that the Silk Road was located far away, nowhere near the route through Nathu-la: "But this was never the Silk Route!" he exclaimed. "If you are going to call it something, you should call it the Wool Route." He stressed the fact that it was wool – not silk – that was the most significant commodity to be transported down the roads from Tibet to India, and that highlighting this

commodity instead would have been a much more accurate representation of the legacy of trade in the region.



Figure 13. Sign on National Highway 31A, on the road to Gangtok. Photo taken by and courtesy of Mark Turin.



Figure 14. Sign at Nathu-la. Photo taken by Pema Wangchuk

I use this account of the *naming* of the trade route during the reopening of Nathu-la as one example of the competing discourses over the production of spatial and temporal representations. The term "Silk Roads" (*Seidenstraßen*) is said to have been first introduced by a German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen, in the nineteenth century (Christian 2000: 2). It has been used to describe the network of routes connecting northern China and Central Asia with the Mediterranean (particularly during the Tang dynasty in the seventh through the tenth centuries), often evoking the imagery of camel caravans traversing the Gobi desert, laden with valuable silks, perfumes, and porcelain (Christian 2000: 2). More a web of separate tributaries controlled by numerous

middlemen than a single road, the trade included maritime routes that stretched as far as Japan and overland paths that extended over the Himalayas and south to India. Silk was but one of the numerous (luxury) commodities to be carried along the routes; domesticated animals, gunpowder, paper, and medicinal herbs also moved and were transacted, alongside the dissemination of religious, artistic, and musical knowledge. Yet the official excitement over reopening Nathu-la as part of the "Silk Road" is not so much a revival of ancient connections as it is part of a *contemporary* global discourse. It comes at a time when regions in Asia previously thought of as "remote" are becoming part of major global infrastructural and information networks as well as intra-Asian and international tourist destinations. Asian and other investors in the construction of new oil pipelines across Central Asia, the inauguration of the Qinghai-Tibet railroad, and the encouragement of tourism capitalize on the imagery of the ancient Silk Route networks as a metaphor for a "return" to an Asia-centered globalization.

On one hand, the use of the term "Silk Road" to describe the trade route from Tibet to India through Nathu-la extends one's idea of the territory, making the small Himalayan region part of a larger global narrative of Silk Road revitalization, of mapping "uncharted" terrains, and connecting the region to urban China's rise in the global economy. At the same time, the use of the term "Wool Route" by the Kalimpong businessman makes visible a lesser-known, smaller-scale Himalayan geography characterized by the trade in wool. Although silk was in fact one of the many commodities that was transported from China via Tibet to India prior to the closing of the Jelep-la pass, it was by no means as central to the economy of the region as wool – or even yak tails. Wool undeniably came through the route from regions like Yamdrok or

Changtang in Tibet; silk was (and is) associated with Sichuan Province in inland western China. Since commodities are often associated with their place of origin (whether or not they actually come from there), the naming of a specific product becomes another marker of place, pointing to a competing social, economic, and political history.



Figure 15. Sign on a shop in Kalimpong

These two examples of place-making, one based on silk, the other on wool are, at the same time, temporally significant. During the opening ceremony of Nathu-la, Pawan Chamling, the Chief Minister of Sikkim, began his speech with the following statement: "A contact that started centuries back between our two civilizations is being reestablished today" (Rajesh 2006). Here, the Silk Road narrative evokes Chinese and Indian

prehistories, maintaining that their connection is an ancient one. Somewhat obscured by the official temporality of the silk road ("civilizations" are spoken of as if they were state-centered), the narrative of wool is more recent, calling to mind a period of twentieth-century regional economic history checkered by political contention between Britain and India, India and China, and of course separatist movements in Tibet, Sikkim, and West Bengal.[38] Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that these traders' narratives are not always emblematic of a conscious "resistance" against state-centered discourses, for traders also capitalize on the Silk Route imagery by labeling their shops with names such as "Silk Route Trading Company." In fact, many – in spite of Indian restrictions on imports of Chinese goods through Nathu-la – would rather trade more marketable high-profit goods like Chinese-made electronics and kitchen appliances than the officially sanctioned wool and yak tails.[39] All told, traders map out an economic history of the region that at times diverges from that of the state, and at times overlaps. It is important to pinpoint where and when these alternative mappings are produced in order to better understand the way that the cultural and economic realities of the region are experienced. The next story exemplifies this further.

"Delhi Doesn't Understand:" Jelep-la versus Nathu-la

If on the national and global level, the reopening of Nathu-la reaffirms "ancient" linkages between China and India and other parts of the world, on other levels, it dislocates smaller-scale social and economic networks. In contrast to the pre-1962 days

[38] Although I do not do it much justice here, separatist movements such as the Gorkhaland movement calling for a Nepali state in Sikkim and the North Bengal hills, have marked much of the recent history of the eastern Himalayas.

[39] The list of restricted commodities for imports to India includes goat skin, wool, yak tails, silk, butter, and salt. Exports include cloth, blankets, medicinal herbs, bicycles, rice, and tea. China has not imposed a list of restricted commodities, except for illegal goods.

when mule caravans followed the trade route that led from Lhasa to Kalimpong via Jelep-la, today's renewed trade circuit through Nathu-la links Lhasa more immediately to Gangtok. Now, trucks that bring Chinese commodities through Gangtok down Highway 31A bypass formerly important trading towns like Kalimpong, eventually reaching Siliguri, the current major hub in West Bengal for goods heading to and from the Northeast Indian states, Bhutan, Nepal, and further south to the port city of Calcutta. Whether or not the actual volume of trade through Nathu-la ever becomes "successful" (and indeed, most traders will agree that during the first two years, trade has gotten off to a very slow start), this geographical transformation has altered the ways that various factions explain future economic prospects of the landscape between India and Tibet.[40]

After the trade passes were closed in 1962, Kalimpong never quite "made it," notwithstanding attempts to reinvent itself as a high-profile tourist town or tea producing center like its larger neighbor Darjeeling. In 1975, after Sikkim became a separate state, and as Gangtok began to grow in size and resources, Kalimpong – although still a relatively middle-class town – experienced additional economic fallout as the tea industry began to go into decline, and serious separatist and police clashes in the 1980s kept would-be holiday-goers away. Over the past few years, local crops such as cardamom and oranges suffered low yields due to a virus, and, as a few residents noted, a high percentage of the English-medium educated youth have left Kalimpong for employment opportunities in call centers in urban areas like Bangalore and Calcutta, only returning to the hills for brief holidays. Several residents linked an increase in theft and drug-taking

[40] According to the Yadong (Eng., Yatung/Tib., *gro mo*) County Chamber of Commerce, only 1,217 Chinese traders entered the Indian side and 574 Indian traders entered the Chinese side during the first trading season in 2006.

to the problem of bored, unemployed youth who were "left behind," either unable or unwilling to find jobs in larger cities.

In 2006, Tsering's group of merchants, traders, hotel owners, and local officials in the Kalimpong area began to meet together informally in order to lobby local and state officials to reopen Jelep-la in addition to Nathu-la. They argued that during the days of the wool trade, Jelep-la was a much more significant pass than Nathu-la, and brought in a higher volume of trade. Furthermore, unlike Nathu-la, which can only be accessed during warmer months, Jelep-la is an all-weather, all-season pass. Opening Jelep-la, I was told, would help Kalimpong revive the "Golden Era" of trade, bringing in much-needed revenue for a flagging economy, and would provide opportunities to market Kalimpong as a Himalayan tourist destination. Soon after the pro-Jelep-la group formed, however, a rival group emerged, claiming that increased trade would in fact cause considerable environmental damage to the already-fragile hill topography.

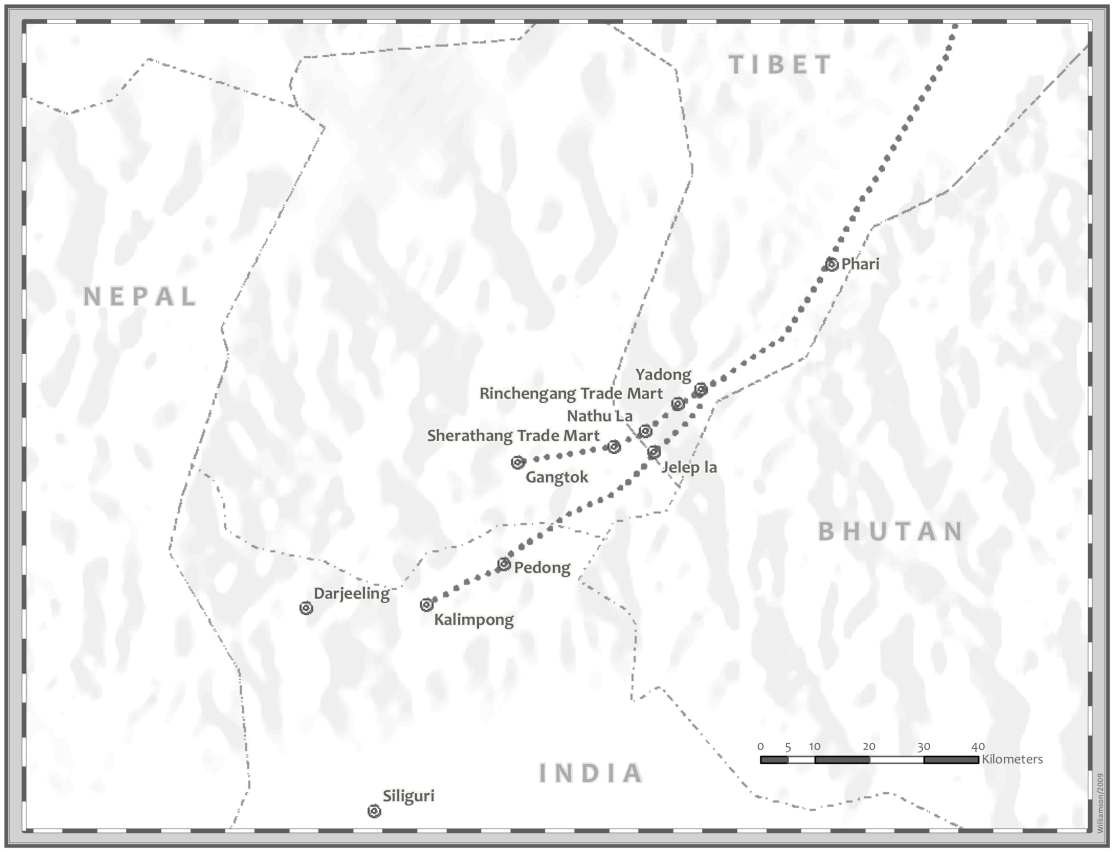


Figure 16. The two routes through Nathu-la and Jelep-la

Tsering, as one member of the group pushing for the opening of Jelep-la, mentioned that the number of tourists at his hotel had indeed declined significantly over the last ten to twenty years. Based on his frustration with the growing economic and social decline of the region, including the theft and drug-taking, he joined the collective of Kalimpong residents, local officials, and businesspeople who were promoting the reopening of the Jelep-la route. While excitedly describing a proposal that the group planned to send to officials in Delhi, he remarked that "trade through Jelep-la would be the biggest thing that could happen to this region." At first glance, Tsering's push to reopen Jelep-la coincides with mainstream development discourses. He spoke at length

about how development maintains stability in a politically volatile region, and that it would bring in tourism, commodities, and more jobs for the unemployed. And yet when I asked how the town would be able to sustain the construction of roads and the increase in traffic along the mountain highways during the monsoon season, he replied:

> Opening up Jelep-la is a desperate move so that we can exist economically. I'm not talking about social or spiritual development. We'll lose that. When Nathu-la opened in July, the tribal people there [in Sikkim] said the same thing, that it would destroy the environment. It [destruction] is inevitable…I am a Communist emotionally, but I need to be a capitalist in order to make a living.[41]

Another perspective comes from a member of the opposing group fighting against the proposed reopening of Jelep-la. Ramesh is a middle-aged Nepali man who has been a longtime resident of Kalimpong, currently working at a local school. He was extremely concerned by the hopeful air earlier given off by traders and residents of Gangtok regarding the reopening of Nathu-la:

> How could they be hopeful? It is just not practical. I witnessed the floods of 1967…we will see such environmental degradation. I read an article which talked about the railway to Lhasa and how it will open up opportunities here. It's easy for some guy in Delhi to sit there in his office imagining that, but no way can all those trucks come through here. It's not practical. The environmental destruction will be immense. Remember when the road was destroyed in the monsoon [in September 2006]? I left Siliguri at 5pm and got back to Kalimpong at 1:30am. I don't see how this can happen. And you've seen the Teesta dam project, we don't need any more of that.[42] I am one of those against the trade.

[41] West Bengal has had a Communist-led government (Communist Party of India [Marxist]) since 1967.
[42] The Teesta is the major river that flows through Sikkim and North Bengal. The Teesta Low Dam hydroelectric project, currently in stage IV, is supposed to be completed by autumn 2009. 103 hectares of land will be submerged, inevitably contributing to increased erosion and landslides. In Sikkim, 30 new hydroelectric projects are underway, and the imminent flooding of Lepcha tribal territory has given rise to mass hunger strikes.

What seemed at first to be a simple set of opposing positions – one group in favor of the reopening of Jelep-la because it would be economically beneficial to Kalimpong and the region and one group against it because it would be environmentally detrimental – turned out to be more complex, and in fact, both groups shared very similar frustrations that were manifested geographically. It was felt that Kalimpong was "losing out" because Gangtok would be the immediate beneficiary of trade through Nathu-la with China, and that the entire hill region's economic and ecological conditions were being ignored by larger state apparatuses—those in West Bengal and those in Delhi. Although the group pushing for the reopening of Jelep-la paralleled development-driven sentiments by claiming that "trade brings prosperity," it was often noted in the same breath that people in Kalimpong felt left out of larger political decisions, and that any proposed development in the region needed to be conducted with a keen awareness of the specific environmental concerns of the town. One trader noted that in the 1990s, "Kalimpong people lobbied to get Jelep-la opened, but all we are, are a subdivision, just a small town with no power in West Bengal. Sikkim has a much stronger lobby because it's an entire state." He went on to say that policymakers and development officials who come from Delhi, "or even from the state government, or the plains," cannot suggest appropriate long-term plans, because "Delhi's homework has not been done for Kalimpong" and they do not know what "life is like in the hills." As these residents have implied, the state-based policy-makers and government officials have failed to understand the economic and geographic realities of the region, an area that is not demarcated by lines on an official map. "Delhi just doesn't understand" was a sentiment I often heard from both groups.

As these narratives demonstrate, landscape is always in a state of becoming and is never entirely stable (Mitchell 1996: 34). Territory can shift, expand, and contract, based on various groups' needs. To open new markets for Indian and Chinese goods, for instance, and to cut the time for their transport in half, the mountain range between Tibet and India had to be overcome. But this very notion of "opening" or "reopening" passes through the mountainous border – accompanied by the raising of national flags, the symbolic handshakes of representatives from the two states, and the erection of gates and passport checkpoints – paradoxically reinforces the Indian and Chinese states as stable, bounded entities. If the conception of the state is, as Timothy Mitchell claims, more of a "structural effect" that is "reproduced in visible everyday forms, such as the language of legal practice…or the marking and policing of frontiers" than an actual "apparatus that stands apart from the rest of the social world," then the production of opposing, alternative spatial articulations can be constitutive of power (Mitchell 1999: 173; 180). In both of these brief examples, trading groups "fix" alternative spaces against other, more authoritative and controlling representations of space, pointing to histories based along a Tibetan trade route that crosscuts and, to some extent, defies state-produced boundaries.

A Geographical Excuse

So when Tsering exclaims that there "are no good maps," it is because he has to make his case to Delhi through official maps. This lived geographical understanding of the economic realities of the region between India and China – not found in any "official" discourse – can sometimes be used to challenge more abstract, state-centered

representations of the route that serve to transform the landscape into a conduit for the "free" flow of capital. Such a challenge is reminiscent of what K.C., a schoolteacher in Kalimpong, once said about "geographical excuses." We were in a small hotel restaurant, eating steamed dumplings made with cheese from a local dairy, discussing the history of products and services – flowers, dairy, fruit, tea, tourism, and timber – that Kalimpong had more recently been famous for, in addition to the wool trade. K.C. mentioned that up until the late 1950s and early 1960s, the town of Siliguri – currently the largest and busiest hub in the North Bengal plains for rail, truck, and air transport between India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Bhutan – was a tiny place, with "no university, not even any medical facilities."

Prior to that time, according to K.C., economic life in northern Bengal was centered on the trade in the hills, in Kalimpong and Darjeeling. Two factors, he said, changed the balance of the trading landscape: "1) The 1962 border closing, and 2) political issues."[43] Now, he laments, Siliguri has "taken over as the main hub of trade. Everyone makes the excuse that Siliguri is perfect because of its geographical location. So why was it not the trade hub prior to 1962? It was still in the same geographical location!" He continued to explain that if transportation in the hills along the Lhasa-Kalimpong route had been a problem, there would have been no trade boom in the early 20th century. In fact, according to K.C., the West Bengal state has now "become

[43] As one Marwari salesman in Siliguri said, "Before the agitations, Kalimpong was the hub of wholesale business for Sikkim, at the time it was mostly wholesalers and very few retailers. In 1986 we came to Siliguri, because of the agitations, thinking it would be a long time until things started settling down. I opened my shop here on Sevoke Road on 27 July, 1986, the day of the worst agitation in Kalimpong, so my parents couldn't come for the opening." Here, "the agitation" (and very likely K.C.'s mention of "political issues") refers to the Gorkha National Liberation Front's (GNLF) active call for a separate Nepali state in the 1980s and the violent clashes that ensued.

indifferent to the hills." The government says, "'the plains are better, geographically,' but there's not much difference. *This is just a geographical excuse*" (my emphasis).

Saying that Siliguri's location is a "geographical excuse" reflects K.C.'s concerns that state control over the movement and direction of trade in the region will continue to shift the balance lopsidedly towards the plains, despite the hill towns having been extremely prosperous in comparison with the plains during the peak of the wool trade in the early and mid-20th century. The historical balance of economic power in the region, while at first concentrated in the British hill towns and then replaced by upper and middle class Indians with political and economic ties to the former colonial elite, began to shift after the reforms in China in 1978, with other towns like Siliguri soon reaping a fair amount of the benefits of the new Chinese trade. The reopened route over the Nathu-la mountain pass, which bypasses many Northern Bengal hill towns on its way through Siliguri to the port of Calcutta, is sure to reinforce this trajectory. K.C. went on to say that products such as tea and timber that were once important to the economy of the hill towns are now "plucked from this region" and transported straight to Siliguri:

> If people in the hills need these items, they are purchased in Siliguri and then transported back again to the hills! The infrastructure is not in Kalimpong anymore, not in the hills anymore. It is in Siliguri - all the warehouses for building materials. There are no big auction houses here. Siliguri has become the main distribution center. Now there is no one in the state government representing the hill areas of Darjeeling or Kalimpong. The representative is from Siliguri, the plains, and will only think about how trade will affect Siliguri, not Kalimpong.

As K.C. talks about the formerly important trade items of the region's boom times – tea, timber, and tourism, sometimes called the "Three Ts of the hills" – he becomes more pessimistic. "There's no future in tea, timber, and tourism. We need to think of [promoting] other products, local products like ginger and oranges." He spent the rest of

the conversation, however, animatedly discussing the various ways that the state might assist local individuals harvest fruits or run dairies:

> [Ginger] would be a great product to sell over Nathu-la if the state just paid attention and helped us cure the infection.[44] Similarly, the region has some lovely oranges. Very sweet oranges, but they were also affected by a virus in the last 5 years. They used to come from villages. Also there used to be an orange juice producing plant which has since closed down. See the apples in the market? They come all the way from Kashmir, and some from Bhutan. If we could do the same with oranges, then we could gain a foothold in the market. The Swiss dairy used to be here, but [it was] closed because of a bureaucratic hassle or something. One of the good things that has come out of this is that it has forced the local people to do something about it. Some local people have taken up small private dairies. Cheese, milk, lollypops; the negative factor has pushed people to do this. There are about 20-25 dairies here - well, as opposed to 40-70 back in the heyday. Hind's and Lark's [names of local shops] sells the homemade cheese. Cheese is sold to other towns like Darjeeling. Also, plums and peaches would be nice; the land has great potential for producing plums and peaches as potential cash crops. The thing is, the state is just concentrating on security and agitators in this region and is not focused on the daily life of the people. The state needs to be a facilitator, not an interferer.

If the "Three Ts" are outdated (i.e. not profitable anymore) for those producers in Kalimpong, K.C. demonstrates that there are indeed spaces for local farmers and cheesemakers to make their town relevant again in the face of the new economy. Thus, the reattaching of objects to place (even though they may not originally be produced in those places!) is one way that people in blindspots can attempt to make their locations more visible or coherent. I explore this notion in more detail in the next chapter, "From Loom to Machine: The Life of Wool," which examines traders' everyday experiences with their products – specifically wool – in order to illustrate how commodity networks have been transformed geographically over time. I will include ethnographic material on how older family connections through wool now intersect with newly established (and

[44] Over the past 5 years, ginger crops in north Bengal, Sikkim, and Bhutan had fallen prey to a fungus that has resulted in cutting production by nearly half.

arguably more successful) Chinese networks dealing in goods such as kitchen appliances and mobile phones, and examine how some members of the younger generation of traders are now involved in revitalizing Tibetan wool for both local and international markets.

Chapter Four

From Loom to Machine: The Life of Wool

The world of commodities would have no reality without moorings [45]

The World of Commodities

In a book based on the memoirs of Newar merchants who conducted business between Lhasa, Kathmandu, and Kalimpong in the first half of the 20th century, Kamal Tuladhar writes of his family's shop in Lhasa:

> English woolens, Japanese velvet, Chinese silk, Nepalese cottons, and Indian brocade…filled the shelves. Coral was imported from Italy, turquoise from Iran, and brick tea from Shanghai…Mongolians and Tajiks brought silk to Lhasa, Bhutanese brought rice to barter for silk, Golok nomads brought wool, Amdowas brought Chinese silver coins and gold dust, and Khampas brought brick tea to trade for textiles [Tuladhar 2004: 22; 69-70].

If we identify this myriad of commodities in the Lhasan marketplace as a material reflection of the social and economic networks that link Lhasa with other parts of the globe, then perhaps we may begin to systematically connect small pieces of "everyday" material culture – turquoise or wool; DVDs or washing machines – with more abstract processes of regional and global economic change. In the Tibetan marketplace, journeys of goods involve increasingly far-flung and complex production and distribution channels. Contemporary brocade jackets may be made of silk brocade from Varanasi, synthetic wool from Xinjiang, and buttons from Kathmandu; perhaps they are assembled and tailored in Lhasa, and sold in Germany. That networks are quite opaque evokes Marx's injunction in his writings on the commodity, to peer beneath the surface sheen of

[45] Lefebvre, Henri. 1991 (1974). *The Production of Space.* Oxford: Blackwell, p. 403.

the "mysterious" finished product at the web of social relations actually involved in its production, distribution, and marketing (Marx 1976: 168). As Victor Buchli points out, material culture study, with its focus on the creation of social meanings intertwined with the history, archaeology, and anthropology of things, has never been a discipline in and of itself, but rather an "intervention within and between disciplines" (Buchli 2002: 13), and it is precisely this capacity of material culture study to be situated cross-disciplinarily – and indeed, cross-regionally – that makes it an appealing vantage point from which to investigate processual changes in the broader political economy of the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route.

In this chapter, I would therefore like to focus specifically on traders' experiences with the goods they have traded in order to show how personal narratives of the properties of commodities, as well as their spatial trajectories and origins, can serve as examples of "fixing" various kinds of geographies of place against others. This analysis will be conducted in two parts. In the following section, "Narratives of Decline," I examine traders' descriptions of the contemporary decline of the quality of commodities and of trade, demonstrating that values of purity and life or dirt and death are attached to goods in very specific times and locales, and acquire particular meanings in these contexts. Subsequent sections take up the *pang gdan*, a deceptively mundane Tibetan women's woolen apron, to show how the attachment of commodities to representations of place figures importantly in both the contemporary study of material culture and uneven development. Towards the end of this discussion, I once again return to the narratives of purity and decline discussed at the beginning of the chapter by exploring

what individuals are currently doing to literally reconnect and revitalize the trade in Tibetan wool for local and international markets.

Narratives of Decline: The Past as "Natural," the Present as "Fake"

From my fieldnotes (Lhasa, 11/30/05):

> Excessive hanging out today. I am absolutely full of sweet tea to the extent that dinner with DK and E and K will be a little too much. It was a bit of a tough day – I just had no confidence that I can pull off this project. Went to the teahouse to just hang out with the girls [the staff] and learned that K [in her early 20s] is an orphan with 10 brothers and sisters from Gonggar; she worked at the teahouse for 8 years, where the other girl worked there 13 years. K told me about a TV show where butter sellers cheat by putting a potato into the butter mixture to make it heavier and less pure – a woman went to the police because of this. A funny *rmo lags* [Tib. older woman, literally "grandmother"] was there as well – she warned me of the many *rku ma* [Tib. thieves, robbers] around town.
>
> Met a woman, 81 yrs old, very worried – X thinks she probably knows quite a lot more than she is letting on – doesn't say a thing about mule trade, doesn't want to be recorded, which is understandable – seems as if there may be something she has witnessed or some episode with a friend or relative that didn't go over well. Did say a few things of interest – back in the day, people could wait for their money or goods over one month – people used to trust each other. Seems very skeptical of people today. She said she was old, didn't have much time left, and therefore didn't want to create any problems – was worried that we would ask questions and someone else would try and get information from her. "People don't pay immediately like they do now." "Now everybody has an education so you can't trust anyone." "Back in the old society[46] the quality of items was much better, the people were very good, business was good. Goods from India were of better quality, you didn't have to pay tax like now."

In my conversations with both old and young traders in Lhasa, Kalimpong, and Kathmandu, I was struck by one prominently recurring theme: that the quality of

[46] The term, "old society" (Tib., *spyi tshogs rnying pa*) is temporally and politically significant, as it is often used by Tibetans in Tibetan speaking areas of China to refer to a pre-1950s Tibet. *Spyi tshogs rnying pa* has been used in history textbooks to connote an unchanging, pre-Communist, feudal Tibetan society (Schwartz 1995: 150), but is often used by people simply to mark the time before the Chinese arrived.

commodities in the past far surpassed the quality of contemporary items. In fact, not only were manufactured goods considered of better quality, but the food was more pure – everything in general was simply more "real," unlike commodities today, which were often described as fake, contaminated, or impure. For instance, one woman in her seventies described how *gla rtsi* (Tib., musk) and coral used to be brought from Kashmir and sold to *bar mi* (Tib., middlemen or intermediaries) in Lhasa, who would then barter these items for butter brought by nomads. "Now all the coral is fake," she lamented, "…the quality goes down over the years."[47] Similarly, one elderly Tibetan trader, T.A., who ended up escaping from Lhasa and moving permanently to Kalimpong in 1959, recalled what commodities were like in both Tibet and Kalimpong when he led caravans between those two towns in the 1940s and 1950s:

> *'Go snam* (Tib., felt-like wool) was British. It was such good quality, that you could roll it, it would stay together in a roll and you could stand it on its end and it would not fall down. All this stuff was available in Kalimpong…Kalimpong oranges were sweet and tasty; for 1 Rupee you could get 100 oranges; things back then, fruit, for instance, was counted in the hundreds, it was so abundant…You could eat as much as you would like…And even up until the 1980s, there were a lot of oranges in Kalimpong. Now you hardly find them at all. There was much better sheep in Tibet, everything was better…Reds were redder, even colors were better. You could get anything in Lhasa! Everything was available! People buy from everywhere and brought to Lhasa. Even make-up sets, you couldn't find anything like that here in Kalimpong, but you could find it in Lhasa; the women there were very fashionable with their makeup. Man can create things…he can manufacture…but he cannot create natural things. You would think that with more things our life would have improved by now.

Reds were redder, even colors were better. Here, I find that Raymond Williams' study of English historical perspective through pastoral literature in *The Country and the City* provides a helpful window through which to examine traders' narratives concerning

[47] Coral was originally was brought into Tibet in the 13th century from places as far afield as Italy and the Red Sea (McKay 1997: 54-55); more contemporary sources are Japan and Taiwan.

the items they dealt with. In the context of this study, there is a common narrative where "natural, real, living" things are seen to be from a specific time and place: in this case, from rural, pre-1950 Tibet, and that items nowadays are considered fake or impure. What Williams calls a "structure of feeling" is persistently created throughout history. Through actual, lived experiences, there is a "felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time," reflecting the ideology that things were somehow much better back in the day (Williams 1973). While there has always been a recurring, familiar nostalgia for an ordered and "pure" past, such virtues or notions – sweet abundant oranges, better sheep, vibrant colors – "mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question" (Williams 1973: 12). The shifting narratives of what makes certain commodities "pure" and "natural" are linked to changing economic contexts and representations of space.

For instance, I asked one Tibetan Muslim woman working in a small jewelry shop in Kathmandu (one of the first shops in Kathmandu to sell jewelry made of stones from Tibet) why she thought things were fake now. She replied:

> …because of the situation of the country. Before, there were hardly any of these types of shops. Now everywhere you go, you see the same kind of shop. People copy things, there is competition, they have more capital. And there are many fake goods. Natural things have a good high price. So now there are no good natural things, so it is cheap. And our customers like cheap things.

Although an elderly Marwari man with a shop on RC Mintri road in Kalimpong who used to sell pens and watches and cloth to the traders going to Tibet thought commodities were actually cheaper in the past, he shared the idea that they were then of better quality. He exclaimed:

> The town was so good back then, people made profits, and oh, the goods were so cheap! 75 paise for a meter of diaper cloth, 1 Rupee for 3 litres of milk, 1

> Rupee for 2 kgs of atha flour. And oh, the quality! Nothing like it is now, where the daal is mixed with other things, stones and bad quality daal. The milk was completely pure, not like today where it is mixed with water.

The notion that natural things are now either fake or contaminated was prevalent in many conversations with traders. Fatima's mother, who owns the shop mentioned above, had this to say about the quality of foodstuffs in the past:

> That's why (older) Tibetans are so strong. Yak butter. They eat all natural food. This time all things are not made of natural food. Egg, meat, everything is not good. These times, many people get sick. Cancer, blood cancer, everything. My mom said, in our time (1940s, 1950s), they made food in a clay pot, eat rice, then meat, then they throw away (the pot). This time, clothes clean? No! Everything is dirty. But their time was not like this time, cancer-shmancer. (My mother's) time was very clean, every time they took baths, but our time is very bad. That time, old people lived a very long time, 90 years, 100 years, 102 years. This time, people live only 20 years, 25, 30 years. My mom, my grandfather, ate all real things. *Thud* (a dish made of butter, sugar, cheese and barley flour) was very fresh. Real things. Green things, and boiled things.

"Dirt," as Mary Douglas has famously said, "is essentially disorder" (Douglas 2002: 2). In a social system where dirt represents the defilement of order, Fatima's mother sees the present as bringing with it a disorderliness, compared with the cleanliness and control that seemingly marked the past. The contamination of food, the fake goods, the cancer-shmancer, all reflect the separation of people from products that were once more knowable; the origins of which were once known. According to Fatima's mother, in historical Tibet there was life in everything – people lived longer. You could trust everyone not to tamper with foodstuffs or raw materials.

Nevertheless, in direct contrast to the stories of how wonderfully pure and natural items were back then, there are many traders who remember dirt: plenty of it. Kulbir, an elderly Newar trader, remembered how there were few vegetables in

Lhasa – no tomatoes, no cauliflower – and those that were sold were often rotten. He noted the lack of rice, and the fact that you had to be rich to afford mutton. In particular, there were stories concerning how the wool trade was plagued by untrustworthy types who were actively working to defile the wool. Kulbir would have to poke the big bales of wool when they arrived in Kalimpong to see if there wasn't anything else in it; "sometimes they stuff it with sand," he said. "Sometimes they put rotten leather inside." Similarly, I heard one story about a trader from Phari who used to bring wool to Kalimpong from Nakchu and Ngari in the 1940s and 1950s. To make the wool heavier and more profitable, the nomads would dip it in water and urine; when it dried, it became sticky and heavy. In addition, dirt and sand might be mixed in. The trader who told me this story laughed, saying that they weren't exporting wool from Tibet, but "they were exporting Tibetan sand to India!" Furthermore, when the wool reached Kalimpong, some of it would be rotten and useless, so they would have to take time to select the best kind for further export. When I asked the man who told me this story how the traders would pay when this happened, he replied that the traders would trick the nomads in turn, because they would cheat on the weight; as "nomads didn't know much about weighing, they [the traders] would say it was lighter than it was, and all would be relatively equal in the end."



Figure 17. Sorting and weighing Tibetan wool, Kalimpong, circa 1930s. Photo taken by KC Pyne, courtesy Kodak Stores, Kalimpong

In 1946, an anonymous letter was sent to the British Trade Agent of Yatung, Tibet, and addressed to the secretary of the Foreign Affairs Department, New Delhi. Here, an angry trader writes of the defilement of textile bales on their way to Kalimpong:

> In spite of the fact that quota holders and Commission Agents are not allowed to open the unpacked bales the Commission Agents of the said Syndicate open them and give them for dyeing purposes to different small factories in Bombay. In dyeing the length of the cloth increases by 2 or 3 yards and they (Agents and Commission Agents of the Syndicate) appropriate the excess yardage to themselves. They collaborate in illegal manner with the local dyeing factories and although they have it stamped on the cloth as "Fast Dyeing" actually they put Katcha dyeing on it and thus defalcate a large sum of money…They in certain cases have taken out certain yards from inside of the pieces and have kept them to themselves there and thus have cheated the Tibetan merchants…After opening the textile bales at Bombay they repack the bales and

> inside the bales they put woolen and many other kinds of goods which come direct to Kalimpong without any hinderance from any of the people concerned under the permits given to them as quota for Tibetan Syndicate [India Office Records 1946].

Further, consider a contemporary account from a trader who would travel to northern Tibet to collect wool from nomads as late as the 1990s:

> The villagers already collect their wool themselves. From one village they collect all the wool and they are just waiting for us to trade. And then we visit the village and we talk to the manager or the leader of the village, and then we buy their wool, but the first time it was 40 tons, like 10 trucks (laughs). It's just like there's soooo much wool there. And then we brought all the wool all the way from Changtang to Lhasa, and we have to wash it and get it dry, and there's so many processes involved. Wool trading is really tiring, honestly. And it's really risky as well. The wool itself is pretty light, relatively, so that if you are not careful, people will just like play tricky stuff. There are some nomads that are so wise (laughs). You know, they, when they pack the wool, what do you call it, they screen it (?), like and then pack it in a roll. But when they do that, they do it on the ground where there is a lot of dirt and even sand. And a lot of sands are in the wool, just got in the wool, and then the weight gets just so heavy. And they just do it intentionally, purposely, until to weight up a little bit (laughs) so that they can make more money. And it's so risky for us as buyers.

Although these two sets of rememberances – of pure, "real" products and dirty wool – demonstrate that the recurring theme of "the good old people succeeded by the bad new people" is indeed a "seductive song," they are still of significance (Williams 1961: 83). Whether or not things were in fact any "cleaner" or "dirtier" in the past is not likely to be determined anytime soon (nor are these attributes necessarily binary opposites), but what I would like to emphasize here is that the attachment of *values* to objects is directly related to the particular social and economic situation, and that these values are situated in specific places. The remembered "purity" of milk or barley, for instance, is set against the current influx of cheap goods coming from China, and is therefore located in a very specific time and place: a pre-1950 Tibet or Kalimpong. The

distance felt between people and formerly "knowable" foods or commodities (although the *kinds* of people and goods are specific to the current geopolitical situation) is part of larger historical processes of capitalist expansion. When I asked one man in Tibet about whether or not some people tried to trick traders by making fake products or adding dirt to wool to make it weigh heavier, he simply answered, "before the Peaceful Liberation, nothing like this happened."[48] Kulbir states the situation more clearly by saying, "at that time [before 1950], the quality of goods was very good. Then after the Chinese came, new Chinese goods added many levels of quality." At this point, his daughter interjects and talks about her own business in Guangzhou: "If you want to buy pens and they say one piece is 10 rupees and you say, 'No, I think that's too expensive,' they will pull out an identical pen and say, 'Ok, this is the 5 rupees quality pen.' They can make it look the same, but there are many levels of quality."

In the next section, I would like to narrow this discussion of past and present down even further to look at changes in the materials, styles, and production methods of one very specific item as deceptively simple as the Tibetan women's apron (*pang gdan*). At the regional and global level, Lhasa is becoming increasingly connected to successful inland Chinese manufacturing networks with fast production turnovers; however, at the 'everyday' level – such as the meaning the apron may have for individuals – we find both widening disjunctions between different sectors of social and economic life and counter-movements to reattach earlier spatial values to objects.

[48] The "Peaceful Liberation" (Tib., *zhi ba'i bcings 'grol*) is the official term that the Chinese government uses to describe their entry into Tibet in 1950; many Tibetans will use this term cautiously and not without a hint of sarcasm. When talking to strangers, I found it extremely difficult to tell the difference between the genuine and sarcastic use of this phrase. "Before the Peaceful Liberation" or "after the Peaceful Liberation" was very often used as a temporal marker, similar to "old society" (Tib., *spyi tshogs rnying pa*) and "new society" (Tib., *spyi tshogs gsar pa*), also used to demarcate time/political era.

Paths of the *Pang Gdan*

One rather unassuming, but characteristically "Tibetan" object of material culture is the *pang gdan*, the striped apron worn by Tibetan and Sherpa women in many parts of the Himalayan region. For the purposes and scope of this chapter, which does not focus so much on the history and production of Tibetan textiles as on the recent changes in the geographic distribution and marketing of material culture in the region, I will not inquire into the folklore, regional styles, names of color schemes, or specific weaving techniques of the *pang gdan* in great detail.[49] Very briefly, however, the *pang gdan* is made of three alternating panels of colorful striped cloth and is often – though not always – worn over the chuba, the Tibetan dress, to indicate married status. In Tibet, *pang gdan* have traditionally been woven by the women of the household on horizontal wooden looms and made of *shad ma*, a kind of *snam bu*, a heavy woolen cloth, for which the yarn was carded, spun, and dyed with vegetable dyes from India such as madder and indigo. Bright chemical dyes were first introduced to Tibet in the early 1900s (Snellgrove and Richardson 1968: 235); in the 1950s these became extremely popular for aprons due to the increased availability of dyes from Europe and India, as well as the fact that the chemical coloring process proved to be at least three times quicker than the vegetable process (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1975: 79).

Over the past twenty years or so, a noticeable difference has emerged between apron materials and styles worn by women in the burgeoning urban areas of Tibet and

[49] Although there is an extensive literature on Tibetan carpets, there is a paucity of in-depth documentation on other kinds of textiles, especially, it seems, *pang gdan* weaving in Tibet. For an excellent, more comprehensive account of textile production and gender in Ladakh, where weaving techniques are similar to those in Tibet, see Monisha Ahmed's *Living Fabric*, 2002.

those living in areas further away from major cities and towns. One elderly *snam bu pang gdan* trader from Lhoka noted that over the past fifteen or twenty years, more and more urban women began to purchase synthetic *pang gdan* from retail stores, while those in rural areas continued to wear the homespun woolen ones. "No one," he remarked, "wears wool *pang gdan* in the city anymore." Today, in Gonggar County in Lhokha, the southeastern prefecture of Tibet adjacent to Lhasa, one of the major seats of wool *pang gdan* weaving, nomads near Yamdrok lake will still travel to local villages, selling bales of sheep wool to village apron weavers (who are generally women), who then use the wool to weave rolls of striped apron cloth. Their mostly male family members travel to Lhasa during the winter and between the planting and harvesting seasons in order to sell large rolls of the woolen apron material, as well as rolls of cloth featuring a tie-dyed pattern (*thig ma*), often used as decorative trimming on the bottoms of chubas.[50]

[50] Rolls of *snam bu* are measured in outstretched arm's-length measurements (*'dom*).



Figure 18. *snam bu* rolls for sale behind the Jokhang in Lhasa, 2006.

> Yet, as another woolen cloth trader from Lhokha puts it:
>
> People in Lhasa don't buy *snam bu pang gdan* as much anymore. It is much easier and cheaper to get Chinese silk now to make aprons. Amdowas and Khampas will buy the *snam bu*, and even foreign and Chinese tourists, but not those from Lhasa. Lhasa people don't know how to make things out of this material anymore.



Figure 19. A *snam bu pang gdan* roll for sale behind the Jokhang in Lhasa, 2006.

In statements made by other traders of woolen *pang gdan* cloth – who, because of their role as intermediaries, are in a good position to witness changes in both consumption and production – the introduction of this new 'silk' apron material was brought up time and time again. As recently as five years ago, a shinier, silkier, synthetic

thread began to be brought to Lhasa in bulk from Fujian and Sichuan provinces. Although synthetic threads for making *pang gdan* have been brought to Lhasa from places in India with substantial Tibetan communities such as Mussorie, for decades, one *pang gdan* weaver said that in comparison to the new Chinese thread, the Indian materials just weren't as good. The aprons fell apart quickly, and they were difficult to wash by hand. Most shopkeepers and retailers call the new synthetic apron thread 'silk' (*gru'u tsi*) in order to associate it with the higher-value material, but it is in actuality a rayon mix. Unlike the thicker *shad ma*, it can be used to weave extremely narrow and precise stripes, and the finished product ends up looking much sleeker and shinier than the wool *pang gdan* from Lhokha.



Figure 20. Thinner, silkier *pang gdan* thread from Chengdu and new apron design patterns.

While the recent introduction of this new *pang gdan* thread may seem a mundane development, it both reflects and reinforces a number of crucial shifts concerning, on one level, the regional economy of Tibet, and on another level, the cultural meanings and value of material objects. Firstly, from a geographical standpoint, it represents the transfer of Lhasa's dependence for the production of apron materials from less developed areas in the TAR and cities in India with Tibetan populations, to synthetic textile manufacturing centers in inland China. Despite the fact that Lhasa borders Lhokha, over the past five years, faster and cheaper access to synthetic apron materials from much further away – cities in Sichuan or Fujian provinces – has led to a proliferation of synthetic aprons manufactured in Lhasa, a sharp decrease in the price of aprons, a diversification in the levels of apron quality, and competing apron styles (such as those that incorporate silver and gold threads or new arrangements of stripes).[51] Although fewer and fewer *snam bu pang gdan* from Lhokha are sold to urban Lhasans, they are still occasionally purchased by nomads and pilgrims visiting the city from Amdo and Kham, or by tourists, who traders say use the cloth for decorative purposes, such as runners on dining-room tables. From a spatial perspective, then, the trading landscape has altered. While some trading links have expanded and strengthened, others have contracted and weakened. Whereas the apron making workshops in Lhasa have developed strong connections with and are now quite dependent on materials from industrialized locales like Chengdu, the Lhokha weavers are beginning to lose their

[51] In 2005, what were considered by one workshop owner as the "best quality" handwoven aprons were sold at wholesale prices for approximately 75-80 RMB (US$ 9-10). Medium-quality aprons were about 50 RMB ($6), and low quality aprons, 25 RMB ($3). Poor quality machine-made aprons were sold at retail prices for about 20 RMB ($2.50). Compare these prices with the best quality handwoven aprons from 2002, which went for approximately 200 RMB ($24) on the retail market.

consumers in Lhasa and must rely on those from other non-urban areas, or the occasional tourist.

The access to new apron materials is also related to the increase in Han (in particular, Sichuanese) migrant workers in Tibet over the past five years in the wake of such changes as the campaigns to develop the western regions of China, the easier granting of business licenses for outsiders to work in Tibet, as well as the relaxing of regulations related to the household registration system (Cn. *hukou*) (Hu 2004: 55). Migrant workers often maintain and reinforce strong obligatory connections (Cn. *guanxi*) with acquaintances and family members from their hometowns (Cn. *laoxiang*), many of whom have access to materials from manufacturers and factories in inland China. On the whole, Tibetans with adequate Chinese language skills and knowledge of the workings of these migrant business networks have gained access to synthetic thread distributors, whereas those who remain tied to older trading networks are finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the pace of information and new textile supplies from inland China. As Emily Yeh has noted in her work on the transformation of the agricultural landscape in Tibet and its incorporation into the Chinese state, Lhasa has shifted spatially from a regional center into a national margin, losing its "position in the Tibetan cultural imagination as a center of all things Tibetan" (Yeh 2003: 24).

Not only do the new apron-making materials illuminate economic transformations on a regional scale; on another, smaller scale, through the various meanings ascribed to them, they also convey aesthetic and class differences. Prior to the start of the Tibetan New Year holiday, I accompanied some friends on a shopping expedition to purchase new aprons to match their brocade chubas. The brighter colored aprons were

immediately pointed out to me as "*har drags sha*" (too gaudy); instead my friends picked out aprons with thin stripes in subtle colors such as grey and dark blue. In the shops, rows of shiny new aprons were prominently displayed on the mannequins in the front windows. The older aprons made out of Indian synthetic thread were not on show for customers; on the contrary, I noticed pieces of them being used to wipe off the glass countertops. One retailer kindly presented me with a couple of these aprons for the express purpose of cutting them up and sewing them into change purses as gifts for my friends. Woolen *snam bu* aprons were only to be found in individual rolls behind the Jokhang and displayed in "antique" shops for tourists. When asked what they thought distinguished their chuba styles from those of women outside of Lhasa, a few Lhasan women explained to me: "You can tell immediately if a woman is from the village or the city – only the villagers will wear the woolen *pang gdan* with bigger and brighter stripes." One elderly man who used to be involved with the wool trade in India noted: "The *pang gdan* stripes in Lhasa have gotten much smaller and less bright. Only older, traditional people wear the colorful *pang gdan* with the big stripes."

As some long-standing *pang gdan* networks between urban Lhasa and rural areas of the TAR begin to weaken, the bright woolen aprons come to signify an older, traditional, village lifestyle, while the thinner-striped shiny synthetic aprons increasingly represent a more urban lifestyle. It is important to note that, here, the social gap between "modern Lhasans" and "traditional villagers" is not simply reflected in the wearing of the *pang gdan*; it is at the same time produced and reinforced by the people who purchase them, wear them, and talk about them. And, as outlined further below, these very

meanings and information about the product can be further manipulated by retailers in order to market them to more diverse audiences.

Handmade versus Machine-made Aprons

In central Lhasa, a *pang gdan* workshop is set up inside a simple two-storey building, which is indistinguishable from any other grey building along the busy main road. The workshop is extremely clean but cramped, and four horizontal wooden looms are set up facing each other in a square in each of the two rooms on the first floor. The 20-odd weavers are mostly young women (with the exception of one man, the brunt of much teasing) in their late teens or early twenties; nearly all the workers hail from the Gonggar area. Migmar, the Tibetan owner of the workshop, reminisces about the brisk business he experienced when he first opened his workshop five years ago: his aprons were selling at reasonable rates, and his profits increased once he changed his thread supplier from an Indian-based thread manufacturer to one of the Chinese "silk" suppliers from Sichuan.



Figure 21: Weaving aprons with the new thread on a handloom.

In 2002, however, one of his business partners brought some sample aprons to a textile factory in Sichuan province, and showed the manufacturers how Tibetan aprons were woven. A year later, when the factory in Sichuan developed a machine that was designed to mass-produce *pang gdan*, the business partner left Migmar's workshop to open his own *pang gdan* retail shop and began selling the machine-made aprons that were manufactured in the Chengdu factory and shipped overland to Lhasa. Migmar remained at the handloom workshop, and found himself hard-pressed to match his former partner's pace and much lower cost of production. At first, Migmar stated, his customers could distinguish between his own handmade *pang gdan* and his former partner's machine-

made ones, which were beginning to appear in shops and vendor stalls in the Barkor, but after a year or so, the machine-made techniques improved so that it became extremely difficult to differentiate between the two upon first glance.

Although *pang gdan* are still woven on wooden handlooms in Lhasa in small workshops such as the one described above and in many village areas in Tibet, handmade aprons have become much more difficult to locate in retail shops around the city. Given that it takes one worker three days on average to weave one three-paneled apron on a wooden loom, it turns out to be much more profitable to transport hundreds of machine-made aprons from Sichuan to Lhasa to sell in that same period of time. The owners of the handloom workshops are finding that their handmade products simply cannot compete with the cheaper machine-made *pang gdan* from much farther away. This combination of improved *pang gdan*-making technology and better access to economic networks trumps geographical distance; as geographer David Harvey has shown, capital will overcome spatial barriers such as mountains or long distances, transforming some social infrastructures at the expense of others (Harvey 1999: 399). Globalization, often either touted as a force that brings the world "closer together" through new technologies or demonized as wreaking environmental and social havoc, is in actuality fraught with inequality, and these contradictions of capitalist expansion take on acute spatial expressions, where some regions benefit and others do not (Smith 1990).

Even within the confined space of the weaving workshop, meaning regarding apron styles and their supposed values is produced continuously. The weavers in the workshop were all wearing woolen *snam bu* aprons or aprons made out of the less popular Indian thread. Though the shiny aprons made from the "silk" thread have indeed

gone down in cost over the past five years, at a wholesale price of 75 RMB (9$), they were still relatively unaffordable for the weavers. Migmar mentioned that the majority of the young women workers come in only knowing how to make 'old' apron styles, so he had to hire and pay someone 500 RMB (62$) a month to supervise these young weavers from the countryside. "Although they know how to make them," he remarked, "they do not know how to make them according to Lhasa styles, which are not as bright and wide-striped, nor do they know how to arrange the colors properly, or to put the stripes in proper order" (Tib., *gra sgrig*). Although many of the weavers are from Lhokha and therefore were taught how to make aprons by trans-generational weaving families, they end up learning how to produce very different kinds of apron styles to be worn in urban Lhasa.

Both Han and Tibetan *pang gdan* merchants and consumers have stated that although it has become difficult to tell the difference between hand and machine-made *pang gdan* at first glance, the former are still of considerably higher quality since the threads are more tightly woven and the cloth is softer as a result. In a chuba retail shop in Lhasa, one proprietor showed me the label on a machine-made *pang gdan* from inland China. Curiously, the label boasted a Tibetan brand name and a picture of a wooden loom, suggesting that the apron was instead handmade in the TAR. Because intermediaries such as marketers and merchants are often familiar with the geographies of both production and consumption – that is, they know both where the aprons are produced or procured and where the consumers reside – they may configure spatial and cultural relationships among the object, its producers, and its consumers in order to sell

their products and obtain a monopoly price – as, for instance, where a *pang gdan* that is in reality machine made outside of the TAR is advertised as "handwoven in Tibet."

In studies of the economies of other regions, it has been observed that it is easier now for goods that were once linked to a specific region or ethnic group to be produced or procured anywhere, by anybody (Cohen 2000: 22). To take one example, because of factors such as advanced refrigeration technologies, quicker modes of transport, and overfishing in Japanese waters, the bluefin tuna used for sushi (long associated with Japan) is now fished off the coast of Maine, shipped back to Japan's wholesale fish market for auctioning, and then once again sent to the United States for sale in retail markets and high-end sushi restaurants (Bestor 2001: 78). Similarly, the increasing integration of Lhasa's *pang gdan* economy with urban manufacturing areas in inland China has led to the separation of the *pang gdan* from its place of origin. And yet, it is precisely this disjunction that makes it possible for retailers to generate novel stories and meanings about the objects in an attempt to renegotiate assumptions about their 'authenticity,' adding value. For many consumers, willingness to pay a high price for a commodity depends on the perception that it originated in an "exotic" locale (Miller 1987) and was produced by "natives." When "Japanese" sushi is discovered to have come from the coast of Maine or if an apron is not made by Tibetan nomads but by factory workers in Fujian, merchants may produce new stories about them and their associated geographies, reconfiguring existing notions of social and economic networks. Let me now turn to some anecdotes that illustrate how new *pang gdan* meanings and associations with place are produced by multiple actors involved in the tourist industry in Tibet.

“Revitalizing” the Apron: New Meanings, New Geographies

As new infrastructural links such as increased flights from Beijing and the Qinghai-Tibet railroad bring in different kinds of clientele to Lhasa, retailers find that they must stay on top of these changes and market their goods accordingly, selling their wares in increasingly diverse ways to match the demands of this new flood of consumers. Because *pang gdan* serve as more or less utilitarian clothing items for many women in Tibet, and because non-Tibetans will rarely purchase a *pang gdan* to be worn, merchants have lifted the very design of the *pang gdan* from the apron itself and used it to create diversified products geared towards tourists. Like “Yak brand” yogurt or cartoons of Tibetan opera masks on the labels of bottles of spring water, the design of the *pang gdan* has also been appropriated as a symbol of distinct “Tibetanness.” One can now find aprons that have been made into pillowcases and bags, wall hangings made from old discarded *snam bu* aprons, and carpets woven to look like giant *pang gdan*.



Figure 22. Decorative wall hangings made from old *snam bu pang gdan*.

With regard to the contemporary transformation of consumerism in Lhasa, it is important to note that the representation and creation of the "Tibetanness" of objects is a process that is not solely in the hands of consumers; in a paper in the *Journal of Material Culture* on the production of Tibetan carpets in Nepal, Eric McGuckin has suggested that scholars should not only pay attention to the criteria by which different consumers construct the authenticity of Tibetan goods, but also the more indigenous forms of authenticity that emerge out of such discourses (McGuckin 1997: 308).[52] The seller's

[52] Ethnographic research on varying cultural ideas of authenticity with regard to material culture has been extremely useful in examining how power over "objective" knowledge is formed and used (see for example Handler 1986; Steiner 1994). While authenticity remains an important and useful concept, in this case, I have found that the question of whether or not a product is "authentic" only comes in and out of use at

knowledge of changing demands (local and "foreign") from both the producer's side and the consumer's side is crucial in informing the type of cultural, geographical, and aesthetic significance that is attributed to *pang gdan* products. I next present two stories focusing on the intermediary role of two sellers of *pang gdan* handicrafts that will serve to demonstrate how various discourses of authenticity are intertwined to form new *pang gdan* meanings, and how such meanings serve to reattach place to objects.

Pema

From its heyday as a hippie destination in the 1960s to its current position as a Himalayan trekking hub, much of the Kathmandu economy over the past 50 years has been dependent on tourism. Boudhanath (Boudha), one of the two major Tibetan neighborhoods in Kathmandu, is a part of the city that often attracts foreign tourists interested in studying Tibetan Buddhism in the monasteries surrounding the main stupa. Some of my foreign friends had told me that if I wanted to see some interesting things that are being done with old woolen aprons, that I should go and speak to the proprietor of a textile showroom in Boudha, who collects the old aprons and turns them into decorative wall hangings for foreign expats, tourists, and more recently, upscale hotels in Lhasa. Earlier that week, I had gone to the showroom to make an appointment with the proprietor.

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certain times. For instance, for most apron merchants, machine-made aprons are considered inferior to handmade ones in terms of their composition, but are not necessarily inauthentic. In fact, Elizabeth Vann has shown that in the case of mock-brand name items in Vietnam, the authenticity debate sometimes ignores the complexity of the term: "although the terms *authentic* and *real* often are used interchangeably, they have different meanings" (Vann 2006: 294). Moreover, once the apron-making machines began to improve, in the end, few people were able tell the difference between machine-made and handmade aprons.

When I stepped into the showroom (an open air enclosure under a corrugated tin roof), Pema greeted me and gestured that I sit down in front of him, much in the style of a monk giving teachings to a student of Buddhism. Pema is a 40-year-old Tibetan entrepreneur, born in Nepal, who has recently made several trips to Lhasa in order to sell these decorative household items – such as bags and wall hangings – made out of old, discarded, handwoven *snam bu* aprons (of which there seems to be a surplus now that many women prefer to buy synthetic aprons). Some of the larger items, priced at well over a hundred dollars, are aimed at very wealthy groups of tourists who visit Tibet. When I asked him to describe his trips to Lhasa, he replied:

> Pema: You know, now, there is a train coming to Tibet. And of course the train can come. But in the harsh winter, who holds Tibet back on its feet? The Tibetans. The nomads. Because they are the ones who can really survive in Tibet, work in Tibet, they are born in Tibet, and brought up in Tibet. So what we are trying to do is we are trying to support them. How do we support them? By recycling these things [aprons]. By giving more advertisements of all the products that we have here, where we can give a bigger message.
>
> Tina: How does it work when you get the old *pang gdan*?
>
> P: So what we do is like, the good ones, we restore it back, we join it back, stitch them back and make it into a big blanket and leave it. So that in future, people wants to see, where is Tingri, where is Nyalam, where is Shigatse, where is Gyantse, where is Lhasa. [*Here I assume he either means regional styles of aprons, or where these aprons have come from*] There are many items around in the Lhasa market, and everything is either from China or Nepal or from India. But these aprons have the real energy, which has been woven in Tibet before, in this place. So this belongs, so this is the original Tibetan stuff… If I hang this wall hanging up in Tibet in some open place, all this old ladies and old grandpas and all, they will go and look and they will talk to it. They have the relationship, you see. So that's what I want to create. And I want to remind them, "you were like this before." And how are we now? We should be like before. Not like this, eating everything from plastic bags.

At first I wasn't sure what to make of this; much of the interview was spent shifting uncomfortably from my position on the floor, feeling skeptical about Pema's claims to understand the livelihoods of nomads, and wondering if I should mention that I wasn't in Boudha to study Buddhism. The conversation, however, was such a rich tangle of different discourses; the "energy" of the past attached to a specific place (Tibet) and people (nomads), and both the place and the people ostensibly linked to his products for sale. Pema's somewhat embellished statements suggest that he is aware that his clients' demand for "authentic" Tibetan products means that the items should be made *in* Tibet *by* Tibetans. His *pang gdan* hanging is 'real' for numerous reasons: firstly, because a number of tourists are now aware that many items in the Lhasa marketplace are actually manufactured outside of Tibet, these hangings are seen as more intimately connected to the Tibetan landscape, and therefore, as Pema puts it, the "original stuff." Secondly, unlike the other goods in the Barkor, he says that they provoke a relationship with elderly (and therefore perhaps somehow more "traditional") Tibetans. Furthermore, they are handmade with "the real energy" of the past and in contrast with what he considers the rampant consumerism and contamination of Tibetans in the TAR today. Here, the "Tibetanness" of the aprons is both created and reinforced by Pema's narrative, various strands of which are taken from his own detached position as an exiled observer of an urbanizing Lhasa, as well as his understanding of what tourists will purchase while visiting the TAR. The value of the goods is based on the production of a pure, pre-industrial aesthetic that is no more: these are second-hand aprons that are no longer in use, yet their "vitality" and "energy" lives on. Pema's narrative of the revitalization of woolen aprons is thus linked to the earlier narratives of purity that ran through the

beginning of the piece. Take, for instance, what he has to say about the purity of the older wool aprons in contrast to what he considers the contaminated wool of today:

> Sixty years ago, the wool itself had very good genes. The environment was very clean, and we had very good animals, raised in a domestic way in Tibet, so there was no chemical pollution or anything. So we compare it with the wool which is now in the 21st century and there is lot of difference. There is a lot of dead fibers these days…these days what they do is they use lot of chemicals, mixtures, and then sometimes even you find nylon and polyesters involved with the woolen materials. And they even tag them with very good names, like sometimes they say like "Giordano" or whatever - you know, big companies, they say it's woolen. But if you thoroughly check the material and look into it, you can find oil products.

When I asked Pema to tell me about what he knows of the history of the wool trade, I was not aware that when he said he would "start at the beginning," he meant prehistoric beginnings:

> So nomads, they first used the wool and made felt from water and sand. So this was human dress for survival, which could be used at night and day, without tents, or without shelter. I am talking about very early. And when they used the felt, they used to use it around their waist, you know, very thick felt around their waist, and that keeps their kidneys warm. And they sleep under rocks, inside caves, and they didn't have animals, you know, at that time. They used to go like nomads, like hunting, whatever - this was like the stone age time, how the wool evolved in Tibet. After the felt, then came some clothing, then tents. And then slowly, they started to weave carpets.

When this evolutionary handmade aesthetic is emphasized, the tourist (or the anthropologist, in this case) is made to feel connected with an imaginary nomadic weaver in a precapitalist Tibetan rural scene. The irony is that, like the shirts he mentions are "tagged with Giordano," a high percentage of the very *pang gdan* that Pema uses to make his wall hangings are not even made in Tibet, but in non-Tibetan villages in Nepal. Again, control over geographical information – in this instance, understanding that *pang gdan* from Tibet seem more "authentic" than those made in Nepal, even though Sherpas

in northern Nepal also weave similar aprons – is important in order to manipulate the object's meanings to fit the agenda of the moment (Steiner 1994:107). Pema's whole narrative is reflective of the shift from one market segment to another, where the value of the goods is based on a particular perception of authenticity or pre-industrial aesthetic, and the items are marketed as such in order to gain a monopoly price. Indeed, Pema's position can be seen as a major pivot point between the wool and production for tourists because he meshes western and local Tibetan environmental discourses and perceptions of the market with his experience of the global tourist market.[53] Wool, according to Pema, is "hampered" due to global "friction": the development of chemical processing, the creation of nation-state boundaries, and nomads, who don't know any better than to embrace the new Chinese consumerism. And his solution to this friction is to market recycled woolen *pang gdan* from Tibet. The following statement, quoted in its entirety, expresses these thematic connections:

> …There is friction in the planet. Every time there is friction, every time cars are moving, planes moving, and the roads are paved, and it's so hot, and houses are getting built up everywhere, cement is coming up, yeah? And the green planet is getting hampered by all of this…So, you know, there is a cause for the wool getting hampered. So what is the cause? The cause is the modern high technology of the oil products. The animals are dying in Tibet, yaks are getting killed, by all these chemicals, trying to inject them. And sometimes there is a big problem, because sometimes they say, "This is Nepal, [*gesturing a border with his hands*] and this is Tibet." "This is Nepal, this is China." And the yaks cannot come and eat grass. Cannot come and eat grass [on the other side of the border] in the winter when there is no grass in Tibet. In olden days, when there is no grass in Tibet, the yaks used to come down to Nepal and eat grass. So you know, what I am trying to say is we need animal freedom. We need the freedom for the yaks. The domestic animals. So it is good for both sides. You have to raise the yak according to their movement.

[53] For more information on Tibetan environmentalism, see Emily Yeh's unpublished paper (forthcoming) on the "Green Tibetan" (Yeh 2007a). Following Anna Tsing's work in *Friction* (2005), Yeh traces the development of a Tibetan environmental discourse. Originally based on collaborations between exile Tibetans and westerners, this discourse takes on a very different kind of subjectivity in the TAR as a result of both new Chinese links to environmental NGOs and increases in state control.

> You cannot raise the yak just by pushing them towards something else. They are animals. They should eat grass wherever they want to, so that they can have a good body. So that *dzos* (cross between a yak and a cow) can give good milk, yeah? The *drokpas* (nomads) can have more wool. So this is very important. The necessary movement is to recycle the old products and show them into the world, so that they [the nomads] will understand. And to show them the way they used to weave in Tibet, because they want to have TV at home, they want to go for karaoke, they want, all the Chinese try to do it. But if they are strong enough, but if there are more people like you and me, if there are more people who can make them understand what is the reality of living in this planet, and what has the better meaning, and which is richer. If we can explain to them, if we can do something for these nomads by explaining, and upgrading their products, in a foreign market, which is better than their own economic life, then that's it.

After he gets up to take care of a customer, another Tibetan man in the shop, perhaps an assistant, noticing me silently admiring the wall hangings, said "This is old, hand-dyed, hand-woven wool from our culture. *We must keep it alive* as much as possible, we must save every scrap and use it" (my emphasis).

It is easy to dismiss a lot of this talk as environmental preaching to a foreign anthropologist. Nevertheless, what is significant here for the purposes of this chapter is the insistence on revitalizing the wool, keeping it "alive as much as possible," where values of purity and life are reinserted into the wool in order to make it "real" again. These discourses do not therefore expose a clear-cut opposition between "cleanliness" and "dirt" as Mary Douglas might have led us to believe in *Purity and Danger*. The reconnecting and revitalizing that is taking place is both a spatial and a temporal action, highly dependent on locating or fixing the wool back in Tibet. It is wool that is not only Tibetan, but woven in Tibet before Tibet became part of China. The irony, of course, is that these items were not actually made in Tibet, and that they are being sold to foreign

tourists and wealthy Chinese.[54] In Lhasa, I heard a similar argument about revitalizing Tibetan wool.

Dawa

Dawa is a Tibetan businessman in his mid-30s who returned to Lhasa approximately ten years ago after finishing his schooling to work in a retail carpet shop. Part of a growing group of middle-class Tibetan entrepreneurs who speak Chinese, Tibetan, and English, Dawa recently left his job in order to take advantage of expanding opportunities in the tourism industry in the TAR. Many of Dawa's peers consist of the (now grown) children of relatively well-to-do Tibetan families who have been sent to inland Chinese boarding schools and universities so that they might gain better employment opportunities in the future (Shakya 2008: 9). While discussing his dream of opening a large handicrafts center in Lhasa, he explained how he wanted to market his goods to new groups of consumers. Dawa remembered how, ten years before, 90 percent of his carpet shop customers were western tourists, compared to 2006, when his clientele was at least 50 percent Chinese.[55] He described how five or ten years ago, Tibetans would come into the shop, "and when we would tell them the price of our carpets, they were shocked. But now the Tibetans who come to see them are ready to bargain. 'Give

[54] There are a number of good anthropological studies that address the geographical separation between producer and consumer, and the strategic marketing of place in order to ostensibly bridge the gap between buyer and seller. Notable examples include Carol Hendrickson's work on Guatemalan handicrafts sold in western mail-order catalogs (1996), and Sharon Hepburn's work on "Thamelwear," clothing sold in Kathmandu that is marketed as "Tibetan" but actually produced by Nepalis (2000).

[55] There has been a dramatic change in the number of foreign versus domestic tourists visiting the TAR over the past 10 years, mostly due to rapid increases in transport connections to and from Beijing. In the 1990s, foreigners made up the majority of tourists to the TAR. Domestic tourism, on the other hand, increased by 30% every year between 2000 and 2005. In 2007, the year after the inauguration of the railroad, the number of domestic tourists came to 3.4 million, far surpassing 2.6 million, the population of the entire TAR, whilst the number of foreign tourists was 338,744 (China Data Center 2008; Murakami 2007: 58).

me a little bit of a discount and I will buy this carpet', they say – even though they are paying double the amount of what they are getting in the market!"

Dawa was excited about the potential for the growth of Tibetan consumer markets for handicrafts. "We have to make these things [handicrafts] kind of like a fashion for Tibetans," he said. "The trend is coming." The *pang gdan* economy seems to be in the middle of several transformations with regard to the value consumers place on the method of production. Along with shifts in the geographies of handmade versus machine-made products described earlier, there are changes in what it *means* for an object to be "handmade" or "machine-made." "Handmade" may very well still signify "old-fashioned" or "traditional" to a majority of Lhasans, but to some new groups of consumers (including a growing number of wealthy Chinese tourists or Tibetans who may have lived for some time in large cities like Beijing or London), owning a handmade, decorative item from Tibet may actually distinguish one as "modern" or a well-to-do person who cares about high-quality, unique items. In some cases, however, the consumption of handmade apron products may signify a return to, or a re-fixing of a "Tibetaness" that is felt to have been distant or missing, particularly amongst middle class Tibetans who spent most of their educational or professional lives in other parts of China.

Changes in the Chinese economy and the rise of a Tibetan middle class in Lhasa mean that "old" and "traditional" items such as woolen *pang gdan* may now be seen as valuable for a new reason: they symbolize distance and rarity to consumers who may be used to fast paced urban life. Pema or Dawa advertise their woolen items as providing a potential bridge between nomad producers and wealthy consumers, the past and the

present, or nature and urban life; paradoxically, however, a sense of distance still needs to be maintained. Sellers will market ordinary goods by making them distant, exotic, and yet somehow accessible at the same time (Simmel 1990: 66). The resulting tension between distance and accessibility is formed with the acute knowledge of a particular market, its history, producers, and the tastes of its consumers. The very *use* and display of this new form of *pang gdan* (not as an everyday clothing item but as a piece of household décor) further separates those who can afford these labor-intensive, high-end objects of tradition and those who cannot.

Over dinner in Lhasa, I noticed that Dawa also brought up the idea of wool being "alive," that the use of machines in some ways acts to "kill" the wool. He said:

> When you have wool, if it is machine carded, the machine doesn't have – it doesn't have a mind, so the fibers are actually broken down, so that is kind of like removing the life of the wool. If it is like machine carded, then you just take the life out of the wool…you are actually taking the life out of the wool.

The various attempts to revitalize wool for the new middle-class Tibetan market also reflects the movement to reconnect or "fix" places and relationships that are considered "lost" or "broken." The idea that wool from pre-1950 Tibet is "alive" and that new, machine-carded wool is "dead" is reminiscent of Marx's notion of "dead labor," where products and the means of production (e.g., wool and machines) are seen to be productive in and of themselves. Revitalizing the wool by recycling it and turning it into a handmade product involves not only bringing back living labor (for a profit!); the wool itself is seen as endowed with living properties (not the laborers who make the woolen handicrafts) and therefore recognized as having more value. The "real energy" said to exist in the wool is thus more than just a simple opposition to "dead" wool. It is laden with multiple values: involving a change of location (labeling it as "Made in Tibet" as

opposed to "Made in China" for instance) and a change in temporality ("It was produced like this in the past"). Talking about the "real energy" of the wool is also one way to make visible a Tibet – for a profit – that appears to have become a blindspot amidst the larger, China-driven economic shifts of the region. Since there are no inherent meanings in objects themselves – rather, the meanings and uses of goods have always been formed by the *people* involved in their production, exchange, and consumption – the values that are attached to wool at its consumption stage can be very different from those during production. As we have seen, these different valuation systems and narratives come into conflict with the emergence of new geographical paths of capital: for instance, the silky new "urban" aprons signify a modern or sophisticated wearer; new machine-made aprons mean a loss of the old virtues, the traditional way of life, and a loss of high quality production skills. Through ethnographic examples of traders' border-crossing experiences, the next chapter will focus more explicitly on these kinds of complexities vis-à-vis the state. I will show in more detail *how* people actually fix places, and how both the discourses of state security and individual experiences of security are highlighted across the border zones of China, India, and Nepal.

Chapter Five

Border Crossings: Reopenings and Restrictions

Border Crossings

I begin this chapter with two border scenes:

1. Nathu-la. For decades, the hills of North Bengal and Sikkim have provided a cool escape for many middle-class tourists (and formerly, British colonists) during the stifling Indian summers. Although currently restricted to Indian citizens with special one-day permits, one common scenic destination is the India-China border post at Nathu-la. Travel agencies in Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Gangtok advertise the Nathu-la tour package as a high-altitude adventure; according to one Indian travel agency, it is a "wonderful place to behold the nature's splendor and admire the armed forces that stand without the fear of sun or rain to guard their country" (Bharat Online). Indeed, a recent search for "Nathu-la" on the YouTube video-sharing website brought up multiple home video clips of groups of Bengali tourists visiting the border. After watching a few of these videos, I noticed strikingly similar footage in many of the clips.

Permit me to merge them into an archetypal scene: At the border post at 13,000 feet, two small children in brown wool balaclavas gingerly poke their feet though the barbed wire fence as their father films their bodies in India and their toes in China. Then, through the ghostly high-altitude mist and fog, the camera pans slowly across the bleak landscape. In a small sentry box in the background, a Chinese guard is dimly visible. The camera continues to pan across the pass and soon we see families on the Indian side

standing in line to take photographs and shake hands with the Chinese soldiers on the other side of the wire fence.

2. The Friendship Bridge. Hundreds of miles west of the Nathu-la border post is the Sino-Nepalese Friendship Bridge and its two corresponding passport and customs checkpoints in Tibet and Nepal. For both tourists and traders, this is the most frequented overland route from Lhasa to Kathmandu. Every morning at 8am, jeeps line up in Dram/Zhangmu/Khasa (Tibetan, Chinese, and Nepali names for the same town) on the Tibet side of the bridge and in Kodari, on the Nepal side, waiting to transport travelers on their journeys to Nepal or Tibet. In Dram, I stand in front of the red and white barber pole-like border barrier with a German tour group and a number of western trekkers heading home from their trip to Everest base camp, waiting for the border office to open so that our passports can be marked with a China exit stamp. We wait in line for one hour, watching local women traders duck under the barrier in full view of the Chinese guards and walk across the bridge carrying baskets filled with vegetables. Once we get our passports stamped and begin to walk across the bridge to Nepal, some tourists stop to take photographs with their legs splayed on either side of the red line in the middle of the bridge. One side says "China," the other, "Nepal."

This chapter examines practices of border-crossing along the Lhasa-Kathmandu-Kalimpong trade route. Although the kinds of practices undertaken by tourists (e.g., passport checks and photographs with Chinese guards) and those of the women traders (e.g., slipping under the barrier to trade vegetables) are both examples of the everyday experiences of crossing national boundaries, they reveal differential relationships with the mechanisms that maintain state power. Barriers are fixed to mark and securitize national

territory, yet these state-based fixing processes often go hand-in-hand with the notion of economic prosperity based on "free flows" of global trade. As is often noted, there are tensions between state-based border restrictions and the actual movements of people across the border. Through the material practices of border-crossers acting with and around these restrictions, alternative trade routes, which do not necessarily overlap with state ideas of what the routes should look like, are produced. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to show that borders are represented by the state in one way, but actually *lived* in others. Even in the two opening descriptions, the tensions and contradictions between lived experience and state power are evident: for example, the fear of stepping too far into forbidden territory; the Friendship Bridge; the local women who duck under the border barriers daily to continue trade.

I begin with a brief outline of some of the major claims made in the field of border studies, as well as some departures I make from this literature. I then turn to specific narratives of trade practices across Chinese, Nepali, and Indian borders and attempt to demonstrate how these very practices create trading places and routes that are integral to the history of the region. The trading practices described are divided into three sections: 1) Reconnecting, 2) (Il)licit Commodities, and 3) Identification. Towards the end of the chapter, I revert to a regional scale, showing how the practices just described are manifested geographically and reflect increasing economic and social gaps between "small" and "big" traders.

Borderland Studies: Reopenings and Restrictions

Although still a relatively small field, comparative studies of borderlands in the social sciences have been useful in challenging state-centered conceptions of space. In these studies (which are necessarily cross-regional and cross-disciplinary), borders are treated more as cultural and economic zones stretching across nations than hard-and-fast lines of political and geographical separation. The idea of a border is seen as itself fraught with contradictions; it separates some communities while reinforcing the unity of others; it connects at the same time as it disconnects. For instance, in case studies based on the US-Mexico frontier, Michael Kearney questions why the budget for US border control consists of millions of dollars, but no money is allocated to repair the fence (Kearney 1991: 57). The answer, he says, lies in state surveillance where such activities are not for prevention but are in actuality "a way to discipline" (Kearney 1991: 61). Border paradoxes such as these come up time and time again in the literature and – as the discussion in Chapter Two of the British expansion into the Chumbi Valley in the early 20th century illustrates – are historically not new.

Within borderland research, the ethnographic study of cross-border networks of trade, migration, and "informal economies" provides a useful lens onto how some of these tensions are actually felt and/or circumvented amongst those who cross borders in daily practice. Those who cross borders do not always defy the state, but often comply with it in a variety of ways in order to continue to conduct business. In David McMurray's account of Moroccan border crime, he demonstrates how smugglers do not necessarily employ a kind of de Certeauian everyday resistance to state power by pleading with the guards for leniency and thus "bluffing" the border guards. Instead, McMurray argues that both the guards and smugglers are part of a border pageant in

which subservience to the state is enacted publicly (McMurray 2003: 142). Similarly, Matthew Amster shows that with migrant laborers who cross the Malaysian-Indonesian borderland and compete for work, "not only do local people draw upon the forms and practices of the state for their own ends, but in so doing they transform what is meant by the state and state practice" (Amster 2005: 38).[56]

I wish to follow up on this useful and significant literature, but will first emphasize three lines of departure based on qualms that I have about the existing work in this field. First, as already outlined in the previous chapter and in Chapter One, I find that border studies tend to "privileg[e] theories of displacement over location" (Behdad 2005: 231). Perhaps excepting Wilson and Donnan's criticism of deterritorialization, there remains an emphasis on a sort of unlimited fluidity of people and goods across borders. As Ali Behdad has noted, the celebratory use of tropes of utopian mobility mask the very real experiences of how people and goods cross border markers and checkpoints in the first place. There is, therefore, a need to pay equal attention to the politics of location; examining the need of those in power to fix borders for the movement of capital, people, and the reinforcement of the nation-state, *as well as* different kinds of oppositional or alternative spatial fixing mechanisms established by those struggling to make a living in border areas.

Second, although borderlands are often treated by scholars as exceptional or liminal places, they are not always exceptions for those people who are living in the borderlands. The danger of privileging national border zones as a state of exception (or

[56] I take some issue with the term "informal economies," insofar as it sets itself up against and assumes such a thing as a "formal" economy, but as it has been applied by many anthropologists to simply mean "unregulated business activities or services," I will use it as such here. For additional ethnographic accounts, see Abraham and van Schendel 2005, Cheater 1998, Konstantinov 1996, Nordstrom 2007, Stephen 2007.

an exceptional state) is that it ignores other kinds of borders – those not necessarily limited to delineating nations and physical territory. These include, for example, divisions between class and ethnic "ghettos" within a city; or between rural and urban areas (even manifested through differences in apron styles, as we saw in Chapter 3); or bodily borders (reinforced through searching for contraband at checkpoints and through having to conform to the standardization of bodily and ethnic boundaries in order to obtain a passport).

Third, and finally, it must be emphasized that it is relatively easy for certain people to cross certain borders with certain goods at certain times. There is a great need to go beyond characterizing borders as zones of contradiction, tension, or paradox. Untangling some of the contradictions and unraveling the multiple tensions between economic mobility and fixity and separation and unity in border areas will hopefully help to pinpoint where differential experiences of border trading might lie at various scales. I now turn to an example from my fieldwork which illustrates what border studies theorists might mean by "the paradoxes of the border."

At one point during my research, I found myself having tea and sweets at the home of a member of the Sikkim Chamber of Commerce, who was introduced to me by a wealthy trader I had interviewed a day earlier. A major spokesperson for the promotion of Nathu-la trade, Mr. Sen was hospitable and seemed excited about and supportive of my research topic. He informed me that:

> The opening of Nathu-la is like when the wall between East and West Germany was demolished!...I have a dream, that in the long horizon, Tibetans in Tibet will have more economic opportunities, and they will slowly gain strength. Then when they are free to trade anywhere, through India, through the world, they will become independent again!

And yet, ten minutes later, Sen remarked:

> I still believe that traders shouldn't move freely, though. Because traders work for profit, not for the nation. They work as individuals, for their own profit. We in India need to assess what goods are surplus and what we are short of, then we can control trade properly. For us, the nation is first, not profit.

I would like to draw attention to this conversation, not to accuse Sen of hypocritically shifting between positions, but to point out that the contradictions in this dialogue are in fact emblematic of state-level policies on border trade. Here, Sen's brand of neoliberal Sino-Indian free trade goes hand-in-hand with the drive for Tibetan sovereignty as well as strict control over the traders' activities.[57] It is precisely these contradictions that Peter Andreas discusses in relation to what he calls the public "performance" of U.S.-Mexico border control. Andreas notes that states must "assure some of the audience that the border is being opened to legal flows while reassuring the rest of the audience that it is being sufficiently closed to illegal flows" (Andreas 2000: 10; 17). Similarly, in Andrew Walker's study of trade in the Golden Triangle region of Southeast Asia, he argues that "as trading becomes more liberalized, opportunities for regulation flourish" (Walker 1999: 7). Thus, the very act of "opening" or "reopening" a border for "free trade" paradoxically allows for regulatory and disciplinary mechanisms that reinforce the image of the Indian and Chinese states as bounded entities.

For instance, after Nathu-la was reopened for trade on July 6, 2006, those on the Indian side found that the wire fences (first erected after the border was initially shut in 1962) were replaced by twenty-meter stone walls. Traders had to cross seven security

[57] Sen's ideas stand in contrast to the official Chinese line on Tibet, which is that economic development in Tibet will increase the stability of the PRC as a whole. According to Chinese officials, the Great Western Development program (GWD) is "the necessary choice for solving China's nationality problems under the new historical conditions…[E]ach nationality will become more strongly unified with each day under the centripetal force . . . of the large family of the Chinese nation" (Dezhu 2000).

checkpoints from Gangtok to the border, and there were long bureaucratic delays in obtaining the necessary import-export codes, as well as strict restrictions on who could apply for trade permits.[58] In 2006, traders were allowed to sell goods worth only 25,000 Indian Rupees a day (about 500$), and a fair amount of their profits ended up going towards the rental of four-wheeled vehicles that could manage the uneven terrain from Gangtok to the pass. On the Tibet side, they found they had to hire Chinese vehicles to transport them to the trade mart on the other side. Furthermore, traders had to conform to official state-imposed modes of temporality: business is only allowed from June to September, Monday through Thursday, 7:30am to 3:30pm. They also note that the monsoon rains often delay their journeys, allowing for a paltry two hours of trade per day (Atreya 2007). At the moment, traders from the Indian side are only allowed to import 15 kinds of commodities and export 29. Curiously, the list of imports matches that of the pre-1962 trade: yak tails, salt, wool, butter. Many traders laugh at this list, frustrated that they cannot buy or sell more profitable goods such as mobile phones or DVD players like some of the wealthier *thulo maanchhe* (Nepali: "big men" or "big traders") who directly tap into Chinese networks by flying straight to Guangzhou to do business in the hundreds of large wholesale warehouses there. Someone shows me a photograph of the goods available in the trade marts on both sides of the border; the shelves on the Indian side are nearly empty, with a couple piles of sad-looking onions and potatoes, and Sikkimese boxes of tea. The glass cases in the Chinese mart are packed full of items such as souvenir yak tail fly whisks, yogurt drinks, shawls, and cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. At least on the level of commodities, the imbalance in trade between China and India is

[58] Currently, only residents of Sikkim are allowed to obtain trading permits; this is a major restriction that leaves out other traders from Kalimpong and other towns in nearby West Bengal.

clear. In other words, Sen's purported "unhindered" flow of goods and people along the Nathu-la route is anything but.

These tensions are significant, but it is not enough simply to point out that there is a contradiction between opening borders for trade while enforcing restrictions at these borders. Smaller-scale traders do manage to circumvent the restrictions in a number of creative ways, and note that despite the rigid government-led standardization of trading space and time, in actual practice, trade on the border is marked by the complexity of identities and places, creating confusion. In the next section, I would like to draw attention to three thematic examples of place-making on the borders of the Lhasa-Kathmandu and Lhasa-Gangtok trade routes. As pointed out in Chapter One, I choose not to question whether or not practices of trade are always emblematic of "resistance" to power, for they often overlap with and contribute to the shaping of powerful state apparatuses. Although the border simultaneously unites and separates, traders' practices take the form of connecting, dividing, and reconnecting the route in specific ways that are often markedly different from the state rhetoric of what the route *should* look like for capital expansion. The point is to show how trade routes are formed by various kinds of trading practices, both hegemonic and not.

Reconnections: Separating and Uniting



Figure 23. Reopening ceremony, Tibet side, Nathu-la, July 2006. Photo taken by Pema Wangchuk.

Border narratives that came up time and again were stories of exiled Tibetans living in India and Nepal who, after hearing about the reopening of Nathu-la, planned to reconnect with their Tibetan families on the other side of the border, family members they hadn't seen in over 44 years. Likewise, Marwari and Newar traders older than 60 were interested in meeting up with Tibetans with whom they had had business and social connections prior to the 1962 border closing. A Marwari trader who traveled to the border in the late summer of 2006 told me, "The most amazing thing was the rejoining of families across the border after 44 years. Some people were crying the whole day. One 85-year-old man met with his own daughter of 55 years, I saw this myself." I also heard a story from a half-Tibetan, half-Nepali Kathmandu-based merchant, Norbu, whose Tibetan side of the family lives in Yatung (a Tibetan town 52 km from the Indian border).

In June of 2006, his uncle bought land in Yatung in anticipation of the economic benefits that the border reopening might bring.[59] Norbu says:

> Five days ago, my uncle called my mother. He called her [and told her] to come to India, to Nathu-la. [He said] 'They are now going to open it, we can meet there'…We haven't met him for over 20 years. From Tibet to Nepal he wasn't able to get a visa, there were some problems. But on Nathu-la, in one day you can meet.

Similarly, a Sikkimese journalist who had covered the Nathu-la reopening ceremony for a local paper noted that "it was amazing to see families get together in Sherathang after 44 years. They brought letters and gifts; they would get in touch so that they could meet on a certain day. There were lots of people who pretended they were traders so they could see their families." Although the question of *who* can cross over the Nathu-la border from the Indian side is, at the moment, limited to businesspeople with residency in the state of Sikkim who hold special trading permits, the categorization of "trader" can be malleable in the case of families wishing to visit their relatives on the Tibet side.

[59] In Tibet, I heard many stories about wealthy Tibetans and representatives of government ministries purchasing land in Yatung in the early 2000s, in anticipation of the border re-opening.



Figure 24. Tibetan traders, Nathu-la reopening, 2006. Photo by Pema Wangchuk.

Since the Nathu-la border discourse is about trade (and future tourism) for the express purpose of boosting the "national economies" of China and India, these reconnection stories are not typically reported by official Chinese and Indian media outlets. The reconnecting of families calls to mind the sensitive political history and cultural reality of the shared Tibetan/Sikkimese region straddling India and China; the movement of Tibetan refugees from China to Nepal and India in the late 1950s, the Sino-Indian border closure in 1962, and Sikkimese independence in 1947 until its merger with India in 1975 were all geopolitical events that contributed to spatial ruptures, disconnecting families that lived in the same region. Family reconnections make visible a different kind of trade route from the discourses that emphasize the benefits of new financial markets and national stability brought on by the reopening of Nathu-la,

conflating the economic goals of the reopening of the border with more affective goals of "Sino-Indian friendship," and blurring the rigid boundaries of trade eligibility established by the state: traders are for the most part defined as economic actors supporting the nation, not as human beings with exiled cross-border families.

In a small electronics shop in Sikkim, I met with three generations of Marwari Indian traders. I was first introduced to the grandfather, an elderly man in his eighties who recalled what it was like to trade over the passes in the 1950s. Also in the shop were his middle-aged son and a grandson who was busy advising his many customers on which mobile phone network was best. The grandfather and his son both went to trade at Nathu-la upon its reopening, and showed me pictures of the trade mart, the border, and the plastic flowers being sold at Sheratang (the trade mart set up on the Indian side of the border). They were very unhappy with the selection of goods and the prices on the border; the Chinese goods were much more expensive than they had expected. They described their journey over the pass, noting that the grandfather, who remembered how to speak Tibetan from his days of trade in the 1950s, wished to speak some Tibetan with the traders from across the border. He noticed that all of them were only speaking Chinese, even if they were ethnically Tibetan. "Maybe they were worried," he wondered. He surmised that perhaps they had to speak Chinese because there were Chinese officials and guards watching. He finally found a trader from the other side who was willing to speak Tibetan, but only after the Tibetan man took him into his van, closed the door and spoke with him there privately.

In this case, the use of the Tibetan language belies the official languages of the nation-states; in both the cases of the families reuniting and the use of Tibetan in the van,

we see that ruptures or losses resulting from the physical dislocation of territory are met with the strong propensity to reconnect these spaces, to fix them anew. It is in the seemingly mundane material practices that produce alternative spaces where these reconnections might occur. In contrast to literature on cross-border "flows," cross-border actors such as traders are not necessarily continually mobile; instead, they use mobile practices to maneuver around fixed state restrictions while at the same time deploying various kinds of fixing strategies to counter the state-centered discourse of free mobility and flows. We are thus reminded not to speak of mobility as a homogenous thing. Through this dynamic of establishing various kinds of fixity against mobility at different scales, we can begin to see how state power is articulated and at the same time circumvented by informal actors. The next anecdote also demonstrates how the practices of people produce routes and histories of trade; this time we shift from Nathu-la on the Sino-Indian border to Kodari and the Friendship Bridge, on the Sino-Nepali border.

Khasa and Kodari: (Il)licit Rice Cookers and Rum[60]

It is the middle of the monsoon season in Nepal, and I am trying – rather unsuccessfully – to wade quickly through the flooded streets in order to meet Jigme at his one-room flat. Jigme shares the flat with his wife, baby, and sister-in-law in Jorpati, a 15 minute walk from the main Tibetan quarter of Kathmandu. He is a stickler for time, so when I arrive, I am glad I am not more than a few minutes late. Sturdy Chinese plastic sandals, worn by most people to better navigate the watery back alleys, are lined up outside the door. I leave mine with the lot, pull away the Tibetan doorhanging, and greet

[60] Here I borrow from Carolyn Nordstrom and Abraham and van Schendel's work; sectioning off the word in this way draws attention to the intertwined and often indistinguishable worlds of licit and illicit activities (Abraham and van Schendel 2005; Nordstrom 2007: xviii).

those who are gathered on the mattresses on the linoleum floor. There are some relatives there whom I remember from before. Jigme is a very serious young Tibetan man in his early 20s, with a Sherpa wife and a newborn baby. Small clear brown glasses are taken off the shelves, and his wife, Dawa, pours in the milky sweet tea. She seems to have a very bad case of boils, and the baby is coughing and looks unwell. I recognize the glasses; they are the same ones that are used in most *ja khang* (teahouses) in Tibet. While we have boiled potatoes with chili, I look up and notice bottles and bottles of 100-proof Chinese distilled sorghum or rice liquor (*baijiu*) lined up neatly along the shelves. Although I have known Jigme since I arrived some 5 months previously, he finally begins to tell me details of his own story as a trader.

He tells me he is a *sanno maanchhe,* a small trader, and began trading recently, in 2004, after having worked as a wool-washer in a carpet factory and was introduced to trading by his wife, whose family lives on the border of Tibet and Nepal. "At that time," he recalls, "we were not married, though she used to do the same circuit. She used to bring t-shirts and mosquito nets to Nepal. At that time we knew each other; she would bring the luggage from Tibet to Kathmandu, and I would help her sell to the shops." He would also help her go door to door in small shops on the Tibet side of the border, in the Khasa area, asking residents and shopkeepers what they might need from Nepal. Often they would take "hard drinks" from Nepal, especially *khukri* rum and cigarettes, both of which become illegal if more than a certain amount is brought across the border.

I point to the bottles of *baijiu* lining the shelves and ask Jigme how he brings this shipment across the border. There are two ways, he says. The first way is to simply carry them across. Both Jigme and his wife animatedly describe the various methods of

transport and concealment that traders use to take the items across the border. The second way is to hide the goods in other items.

> With tsampa [Tibetan barley flour], there are not any problems. They [the border patrol] see it and say, 'Oh this is [just] tsampa, then you can leave. Oh, this is just tsampa.' With tsampa there is no problem. Otherwise we have to pay tax.

Tsampa is the most staple of all Tibetan food, often mixed with butter tea and eaten in fist-sized lumps throughout the day to stave off hunger in high altitudes.[61] Mundane, everyday commodities like tsampa (or toilet paper, batteries, or mosquito nets for that matter) almost always travel along the same routes as the illicit commodities. As Carolyn Nordstrom has written, "popular media would have it that drugs travel a 'drug route,' arms an 'arms route' and computers a more cosmopolitan 'high-tech corridor.' In fact, shipping routes *are* markets…all manner of goods can pass among them," from the totally illegal to the completely everyday (Nordstrom 2007: 8). Illustrating this notion of routes-as-markets, transporting electronics across the border is also illegal, but Jigme notes that "sometimes we also brought rice cookers from there [Tibet]. But for rice cookers, they [the border guards] don't make a problem. I don't know why." This statement further illustrates the Marxian claim that social relations appear as if they exist between objects themselves, the objects being differentiated by class. "Lower class," mundane items such as rice cookers are associated with smaller scale traders and waved on, as opposed to higher tech electronics such as stereo systems or laptops.

Similarly, on Nathu-la, an Indian journalist who recently traveled with traders across the border stated:

[61] Tsering Shakya notes that the eating of tsampa – not necessarily religion, language, or geography – is often what connects diverse groups of Tibetans, including those in Ladakh and Bhutan (Shakya 1993).

> Yes, there are restrictions on goods, but people from the Tibet side will bring thermoses and lunch containers full of tea and rice for lunch, then sell the containers on the Indian side. People also brought electric cookers and said they were 'gifts' for their family on the other side of the border, but then they actually sold them.

Another trader who travels between Nepal and Tibet says that it is easier for women to trade because they say they can go "shopping." He says, "They buy ten rice cookers and find other women to go with them in the truck so it looks like they are each carrying one." Again, like the bags of tsampa, rice cookers are items that are not considered under suspicion by authorities; these are for domestic or household purposes, and therefore considered "women's" commodities. These gendered differences in both the temporal and spatial patterns of border trade are further examples of how the abstract representation of a single trade route does not match up with the complex, lived reality of multiple routes created by the traders themselves.

Yulian Konstantinov has written about similar processes of (mostly women-led) trade between Bulgaria and Turkey, where items for sale are considered "personal belongings." This kind of trade, he says, is absent from reports on the economic situation of Bulgaria, although it is extremely common. According to Konstantinov, the characteristic feature of this kind of trade is its strategic "ambiguity," the traders passing for tourists, and the merchandise passing for personal items. (Konstantinov 1991: 762). Similarly, as Angela Cheater says in her study of Zimbabwean women traders, the majority of those who travel out of Zimbabwe to South Africa and Botswana to go "shopping" are lower-class women. Such trading in fact requires a sophisticated knowledge of bureaucratic procedures and finance and sometimes threatens male notions

of proper female activities (Cheater 1998: 203; 208). Overall, though, higher class women (e.g. airline employees) can bring higher cost goods (e.g. televisions) across borders with little stigma, whereas lower class women dealing in such goods often get reputations as prostitutes, as threats to the state, as dangerous women (Cheater 1998: 206). These increased divisions between "big" and "small" traders as well as increased gendering of commodities are examples of the consequences of the changing – and uneven – trade patterns in the region.

Depending on certain trading regimes, the very same rice cooker can be seen as women's "shopping," or turned into a "gift" for relatives across the border, or in some cases, seen as contraband electronics. Commodities themselves can be marked by gendered assumptions which may be useful or detrimental for the continuation of trade. At the same time, border experiences accentuate gender and class divisions of trade, where lower-class Sherpa women who cross borders with relatively small quantities of contraband have a very different experience with state authority than wealthier Newar women who travel in planes to buy higher-quality goods in Guangzhou.

Pradip and Identification

My partner and I have a friend, Amir, who owns a small shop on the busy streets of Kathmandu near one of the main shared-taxi stands. Amir always asked about my research if I stopped in, but there was never a lengthy conversation about it until one day, when I was on my way out of his shop to catch a shared-minibus back to our flat. "By the way," he calls out, "I have a good school friend, Pradip, who is a trader, a *thulo maanchhe*, a big man, who is always traveling back and forth from Kathmandu to

Guangzhou. Do you want to meet him?" We quickly arrange to meet the next day at a casual rooftop restaurant, popular with some of the young elite businesspeople of Kathmandu. Pradip makes a dramatic entrance at the door of the restaurant, pillion riding on the back of an assistant's expensive Royal Enfield motorbike, wearing an immaculate tailored pinstripe suit with a purple silk shirt. He fits Amir's description of a *thulo maanchhe* to a T. We sit down, and he is eager to tell me about his business; like most of the traders I've talked to, he begins with his family's trade history:

> Pradip: My father did this business [trade] too from Barabise [a Nepali border town near Tatopani]. Material, like textiles, with gold and silver – brocade – was brought from China. My father used to do this job for 35-40 years.
>
> T: And what do *you* trade in?
>
> P: Anything. Everything. Whatever will sell. Whatever people need here.

Almost answering my question, Pradip's mobile phone rings. A shipment of paraffin wax from Saudi Arabia has come in, as well as a truckload of powdered milk from Khasa. While Pradip is on the phone, Amir remarks, "In older times, I still remember, they used to call Lhasa the source of gold (*Lhasa maa sun ko khaanii*)." Pradip joins us now:

> During my father's time, whatever they invested in, they can get 3 times profit. Anything. That was the 1950s or so. But now all things are coming from China. Everything is coming from China (laughing)! Even *daal bhaat* (lentils and rice, a staple dish in Nepal and Bengal) is coming from China!

Pradip shows me his ID card that allows him to travel to China. It reads, "Foreigner Identification Card from Zhangmu/Dram/Khasa" (the Chinese, Tibetan, and Nepali names for the same Tibetan border town), valid only in China. "I have lots of

passes," he says. He tells me about some of the traders who live in the borderlands between Tibet and Nepal.

> What they do is that they have a Chinese passport, but they have also taken Nepali citizenship in the area of Tatopani (a border town in Nepal). So what they do is when they come to Nepal, in Tatopani there are many guesthouses. And in one guesthouse they give the Chinese ID to somebody, and then they take their Nepali ID. Most people do this. When they enter Khasa (in Tibet), they put the ID in the other guesthouse and exchange IDs. 60% of the people do that. They can travel anywhere in Nepal and also anywhere in China.

Another trader from Lhasa mentions the same thing about traders from Dram:

> Their identities are like, they have two....most of them have two passports – a Nepali passport and Chinese passport. So they can just go back and forth freely and so that actually affords them a really good chance to be the middlemen, to take advantage of both sides. Buying stuff and selling stuff, without paying tax sometimes even. Because they know both the languages, these are the middlemen.[62]

In border zones, nation-bound identities are assigned, taken, and withheld; passports and papers become extensions of the traveler, defining who people are supposed to be, according to the strict criteria of the state. By (literally) swapping identities, traders' practices demonstrate that border-crossing experiences are a lot more diverse and complex. And this practice of switching IDs extends to commodities as well; a businessman from Kathmandu mentioned that when he travels to Kodari (the checkpoint between Nepal and Tibet), traders who come in Chinese vehicles take the "Made in China" labels off mock-brand-name clothes coming from Tibet and replace them with "Made in..." labels from other countries. The point here is that although

[62] According to Sara Shneiderman, "The 1992 implementation of a Sino-Nepalese treaty, which allows citizens of either country who reside within 30 km of the border to cross freely without a passport or visa, has allowed many families to reunite. The provision has also proven an advantage to some families, who have been able to establish joint-venture businesses" (Shneiderman 2005: 32). However, traders must still carry a full passport and visa anywhere outside the 30km radius, so having both passports, while illegal, allows for a much greater range of movement.

labeling someone (or something) as "Nepali" or "Chinese" produces a standardized marker for the "authenticity" of goods or the identity of individuals, these "fixings" of place are considerably more malleable in practice. At the trade marts on both sides of the Chinese-Indian border at Nathu-la, for example, traders have said that "You can't tell who is Tibetan and who is Sikkimese, so we have nervous, guarded, apolitical conversations with each other, but sometimes realize we are actually from the same side!"

Traders Big and Small

> Jigme: For the Nepali people, we bring toilet paper and canned juice from China, different kinds of chocolate, like that.
>
> T: You have to carry small amounts?
>
> J: Small, small amounts. So all the time we cross again and again and again and again, sometimes [the guards say], "Oh, I saw you more than 4, 5, times, be careful!"
>
> T: Can you make a good profit sometimes?
>
> J: Yeah, if the army don't make a problem on the road. Of course we can make it, but a lot of times, they make a problem on the road and we have to pay tax. Sometimes they say, "Oh, I need this toilet paper," and they take the toilet paper, and then about 150 [Nepali Rupees] is already lost, because they took it. We cannot tell them "why are you doing that?" We cannot tell them this, because we are doing our trade illegally.
>
> T: Most of the shops around here in Boudha that sell toilet paper and canned juice, do they get it from the small traders?
>
> J: Yeah, they get it from us. The big traders, they do around 80, 90 million per year, like that. But for example, we do about 20-30,000 [approximately US $318]…around Boudha and that area, from traders like us, we're not like big men.

I do not wish to argue that small traders like Jigme should always be seen as constantly opposing larger capitalist networks and state restrictions, for small traders often do not wish to remain small. In Nordstrom's account of smuggling across southern African borders, she quotes a local woman working for the UN, who says "…while the world talks about diamonds and oil, food and clothing are the real profits…the juncture where one can finally move from subsistence to capital ventures, is here – it is food and clothing that builds the houses, buys the cars, and launches the businesses" (Nordstrom 2007: 54). There is, however, differential access to networks of food and clothing between Lhasa, Kathmandu, and Kalimpong that has allowed certain small traders to become big, while others barely manage to pay rent.

There is a historico-geographical dimension to the movement of big and small traders across the trade route. Consider the changes in connections between the cities along the routes. In the heyday of Tibetan trade in the 1930s-1940s, the big traders were men from eastern regions of Tibet who had connections to the elite members of the Tibetan government and links with the monasteries that would finance the mule caravans that carried wool and musk from Lhasa through Yatung to Kalimpong. Wool was eventually sold to English and American buyers. When the Chinese entered Lhasa in 1950, the wool trade was taken over by the state, and the big players became the Marwari and Newar traders who provided goods to the Chinese army in Tibet. These communities later had to reroute their trade to Kathmandu after the border between Tibet and India was closed in 1962. Since then, the majority of overland trade from China to Nepal or India went from Lhasa to Khasa to Kathmandu. However, the routes are changing once

again due to the expansion of Chinese capital and changes in inter-Asian infrastructural networks.

To exemplify, I spoke with one young Nepali trader whose family has lived in the Mahaboudha section of Kathmandu for several generations. Mahaboudha is the section of town where one can buy cheap electronics, household goods, and clothes from China, where the "worst quality" (according to some bigger traders) commodities (such as polyester sweaters, kitchen utensils, electric lights, etc.) are sold. Rahim has traded between Khasa and Kathmandu for many years, but claims he has seen things change rapidly over the past few years. He says:

> Khasa was a place where businessmen, big and small, would go to gamble, they could find anything, buy things, get information passed back and forth, girls, karaoke, etc. Businessmen from Mahaboudha would do everything by themselves, they would go to Khasa, do negotiations, customs, then bring stuff back. Now, in the past two or three years, it has become easier and cheaper for people not to buy things from Khasa, but to go to Guangzhou and other places directly in China (through Hong Kong or Beijing) to deal with middlemen, interpreters, then they buy goods from the warehouses or factories, then have them sent, shipped overland through Khasa to Nepal.

Over the past few years, trade is only easier and cheaper for *some* traders; particularly big traders who can afford the airplane flight to Hong Kong or Guangzhou, the cost of the interpreter-middleman (mostly English-speaking Chinese Christians who arrange overland shipping and take a commission), and who can tap into these Chinese networks. Unlike their forefathers and small trader counterparts, who must travel with small loads of commodities from marketplace to marketplace; big traders who go directly to Guangzhou become divorced from their commodities, allowing a new kind of interpreter-middlemen to take care of the logistics of overland shipping. Whereas the

small traders used to be the middlemen in Khasa, this new kind of middleman pops up in Guangzhou in the form of interpreters. Where capital goes, so do the middlemen.

Jigme recently found himself out of work. In 2006, the Nepali government introduced new border restrictions coinciding with the inauguration of the Qinghai railroad, the reopening of Nathu-la, and events marking the tightening Nepal-China trade relations. These new restrictions included a new compulsory identity card system that Jigme has not been able to use on the border, as Nepali citizenship is requisite for applying for the card. As a Tibetan refugee, he does not fall into this category. Often after state security looks as if it might be threatened, new passport routines with newly standardized ways of defining identity and personal characteristics are imposed (Lofgren 1999: 7). Jigme is now deeply in debt, trying to take odd jobs here and there, putting up flyers, helping out at a local school, or working for other traders who do have the (now) appropriate ID cards.

To quote Nordstrom once again, although some of these traders (such as Jigme when he used to trade full-time) "clearly benefit personally, their actions often bring development to their communities. In areas where infrastructure is weak and governments can provide little in the way of social services, it is people like them who help rebuild regional industry, donate to health and education, and bring in critical resources for their citizenry. This is the ultimate contradiction defining the extra-legal: it can act as both harmful profiteering and positive development – sometimes simultaneously" (Nordstrom 2007: 99-100). Besides distinguishing between trading practices that result in positive or negative development and harmful investment in local communities, there remains the need to ethnographically examine how such practices –

both harmful and not – might develop together. If the creation of trade routes is the result of the complicated and often contradictory processes of moving and fixing, or of opening and closing, it is crucial to pit these processes against the backdrop of more mainstream state-centered discourses on borders and trade. Following a larger-scale perspective, the next chapter examines recent major changes in capital, transport networks and trade between India, China, and Nepal.

Chapter Six

New Economic Geographies

In this chapter, I wish to return to the idea of "geographical blindspots" introduced in Chapter One. The rapid spatial expansion driven by capitalist accumulation which results in the lived experiences of "compression" or the speeding-up of time and collapse of space, actually stands in contrast to other kinds of social processes taking place in less-visible – at least from the perspective of nation-states – areas. In scholarship on globalization and capitalism, it is perhaps unsatisfactory to privilege or celebrate processes of expansion over contraction, mobility over fixity, speeding up over slowing down, enlarged trading networks over loss of connectivity with former trading networks, and monetary over barter economies, for these unequal processes go hand in hand.

Focusing on these kinds of wider and faster processes conceals the trends that often occur in geographical blindspots, which sometimes reveal just the opposite: fixity rather than mobility, or the use of barter in place of money. Spatial expansion is never felt uniformly, as it creates differentiation between those who have access to more hegemonic economic networks and those who find themselves struggling to compete against, or to become part of these linkages, or to just survive in their shadow. It is therefore extremely important to show how people in blindspots experience and represent these large-scale economic processes. Their narratives, mappings, and practices may, but generally do not, match the hegemonic stories of global expansion and development.

In this chapter, I will attempt to fit traders' differential experiences of the effects

of infrastructural developments in the region in with the larger picture of recent Asian (and to an extent, global) economic change, showing how the traders' new economic geographies are both a response to and part of the new geographies of the Chinese-driven Asian economy. As the Chinese government is extending its capital development westwards into Tibet and searching for new markets in South and Southeast Asia, former trading hubs like Kalimpong are being bypassed. By looking towards the proposed extensions to the Qinghai-Tibet railroad and future border openings as opportunities for new market niches, many young entrepreneurs are forging new trading networks, turning away from the Lhasa-Kalimpong and Lhasa-Kathmandu routes and instead making connections with major industrial centers in southern China. While abandoning long-standing social connections, they are revealing a considerably different economic geography than that of their parents' and grandparents' generation.

Here, I will explore accounts from three different groups of younger traders, showing how such directional shifts in trade have simultaneously given rise to seemingly "successful" and "unsuccessful" experiences of exchange. While some traders' new paths have resulted in the establishment of social connections in far-flung cities, the faster communication of trade information, and the diversification of their trade commodities, others have found themselves in the exact opposite situation, needing to halt, slow down, scale back, or reverse their trading activities in order to survive, at the same time reasserting their local experiences of trade. I present these ethnographic cases of unevenness as further examples of the way that spatial solutions to flows of capital can create new problems.

Rahul and Rina: Expanding Asian Infrastructure

"The age in which Asia was penetrated and developed from its fringes towards the center is drawing to an end. A new age is opening out in which the focus of development will lie near or at the center, and the effect of this development will radiate outward to the fringes." (Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier Society and History: Collected Papers 1928-1958* [1944: 133])

Written more than a half century ago, Owen Lattimore's statement seems remarkably prescient. During my fieldwork in 2006, major efforts (including the reopening of Nathu-la discussed earlier) to build up infrastructure and industrial centers in the "deep hinterlands" of inner Asia were well underway. As part of the long-term economic vision of the PRC to "develop the west,"[63] plans are currently being made to extend the Qinghai-Tibet railroad to Khasa, at the Nepal border, and Yatung, at the Indian border, the last major town in Tibet before Nathu-la. There is also talk of extending the rail network to the disputed region of Nyingchi, on the border of Arunachal Pradesh, where several road-building projects have already begun (Ramachandran 2008).

Furthermore, more road projects aiming south through the "north-south economic corridor" will link Chinese highways with cities in Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, all the way to Bangkok. An oil and gas line is being built from Calcutta up to Yunnan through Burma (Fuller 2008). Another border pass, serving as a dry port, opened in 2006 over the Karakorum Highway between Xinjiang and Pakistan. At that time, the road could only handle 2 trucks a day, and now, just two years later, the website boasts

[63] *Xibu da kaifa*, the "Develop the West" campaign, was formally initiated in 2000, coinciding with plans for China's entry into the World Trade Organization. Since then, over 150 billion dollars has been allocated to hundreds of economic and political projects in western regions of China (particularly the Autonomous Regions of Tibet and Xinjiang), in order to promote "national unity and state security," as outlined in Hu Jintao's speech in Lhasa, July 19, 2001, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (news.xinhuanet.com). These development projects include attracting foreign investment, building infrastructural projects such as the Qinghai-Tibet railroad and the Three Gorges Dam, and the encouragement of migrant workers to western areas.

that 400 trucks deliver goods from China each day (Pak-China Sust Port). The push for infrastructural development in China is a reflection of the need to open more spaces for new markets for its surplus commodities. As almost-classic examples of David Harvey's description of the "spatial/temporal fix," geographical outlets are "opened" during overaccumulation crises in order to provide spatial solutions, assuring that capital continues to flow across borders into new spaces. Opening a border or introducing a railroad for the quicker transport of raw materials and tourist capital thus becomes a spatial "fix" both in the sense of a temporary "repair to a problem," and a "fix" in the sense of a "fastening or a localization" (Harvey 2003: 115). As I have written in Chapters Three and Five, this kind of "opening" and integration – in the name of globalization and "free" trade – paradoxically reestablishes China and India as state powers by reasserting their national boundaries (Arora 2008). The next section begins with stories from Rahul and Rina, two "successful" traders who have managed to take advantage of these numerous new outlets for commerce through Asia.

Rahul

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I realized I had run out of business cards. Talking to merchants and traders necessarily brought with it the formal exchange of such cards, and with three more months to go, I had underestimated the number I needed. In Kathmandu, a friend recommended a stationery shop where I could get some printed up within a couple of days on handmade Nepali paper. The proprietor, a large, pleasant man whose brother was working on a masters degree in sociology, noticed my university affiliation and wanted very much to talk about my research. Upon learning that I was

conducting research on trade, he said he would introduce me to a friend of his, Rahul, who was a *thulo maanchhe* (Nep., big trader). It was towards the end of the day, so he made a quick call to his friend, closed his shop up early and very kindly motorbiked us out beyond the Ring Road, the main circuit around the city. On our way out there, the stationer explained that Rahul's father was involved in the old Tibet trade, and Rahul, in his early 30s, was now making it on his own as a businessman. When we arrived, I realized I was in a section of Kathmandu I had never seen before; it immediately reminded me of the warehouses lined along the desolate navy yards of Brooklyn or Long Island City.

Inside the complex of three- and four-storey warehouses, it was clearly a man's world. I kept my head down, not knowing what people would make of the sight of a single woman being led up to the boss's office. Following the stationer up a series of many narrow concrete stairs, I looked out the windows to see porters transporting sacks of what looked like flour on their heads to the trucks waiting below in the late afternoon heat. Rahul sat at a desk in a far corner of the spacious room; it was sparse, with a landline phone and little else, save for a filing cabinet. He was talking on the landline with a mobile phone in his other hand, and I noticed at least 5 people clutching wads of cash, standing in line to talk to him. I figured it would be a while before I could be introduced, but he beckoned me in, and I sat on a chair while the first man in line presented him with a stack of hundred-dollar bills.

Rahul tells me that he began his own company 14 years ago by using his father's old business contacts, exporting Nepali wheat flour to India. As he is currently phasing out his father's flour business, he seems to be quickly becoming more prosperous,

importing raisins from Xinjiang, dates from India, and a variety of foodstuffs from other locations around the world. He says he is looking forward to taking advantage of the new railroad to Tibet, as it will result in cheaper prices of goods that come through China:

> Rahul: Now like 15 days back, they have started that railway. That's it. We…hope that the price will be cheaper due to the railway. They send [goods] to Lhasa, and we will import from Khasa to Kathmandu.
>
> T: How is that going to affect your business, do you think?
>
> R: Much better, much cheaper. I think…We are doing export business, but we have to change to do import. That will be better. Because due to that railway, all the products will be cheap in China. That is why we cannot export. Better that we import. We used to do export business, but now I think import business will be important. Import from China and export to India.

Rahul's emphasis on having to "change to do import" is typical of many of the younger generation traders in both India and Nepal. Phasing out exports and relying on imports from China reflects a major shift in the geographical direction of trade in the region; as one elderly trader who traded in the 1950s put it, "In those days, we took the finished goods [from Nepal and India] and brought them back [to Tibet]…Now it's the other way around. From China you get electronics, TVs." As production centers have shifted to southern China and easier access to transport networks between China and other parts of Asia has driven the prices of Chinese goods down, one way that traders in Lhasa, Kalimpong, and Kathmandu respond to such locational shifts is by changing or diversifying the very commodities they deal with. This in turn marks a shift in the traders' relative location. In Rahul's case, for instance, selling flour from Nepal is simply not profitable anymore, as Chinese flour can be obtained much more quickly and cheaply. Since he knows he lacks the assets to sell Chinese flour competitively (partly

because he does not possess the linguistic ability or social access to Chinese flour supply networks), he cuts off his connection to Nepal and begins to sell products that are produced in locations outside of China. Rahul continues by saying:

> R:…I have started [to import] from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam.
>
> T: Wow.
>
> R: Recently, I have imported black pepper from Vietnam. Vietnam is one of the cheapest…black pepper from Vietnam we can get cheapest.
>
> T: What kinds of things from Sri Lanka?
>
> R: Do you know coconut?
>
> T: Coconut, of course.
>
> R: I've imported coconut from Sri Lanka…I am trying to…do you know gram? Like peas. I have also imported peas from Canada. And I am importing from California also. Almonds…Nowadays I am starting [to trade] from all ways. I am importing California almonds. Almonds you know.
>
> T: Yeah, I love almonds.
>
> R: That one I am importing from California. And nowadays, after 15 days, 15 or 20 days, they will start a new crop. We have to get all this information from Singapore.
>
> T: Information from Singapore?
>
> R: From Singapore, we get information like, 'A new crop is starting this season.'

As Wolfgang Schivelbusch demonstrates in his intriguing sociohistorical account of the emergence of rail travel in the 19th century, if infrastructure's product is a change in location, then new localities and destinations often end up becoming commodities, too (Schivelbusch 1986: 197). So far, we have seen not only that some localities have more

value attributed to them than others, but also that some traders have the resources to switch locations in order to take advantage of these new opportunities while others do not. In this case, Rahul has increased his access to global information networks and a diverse range of commodities in order to remain competitive in the market now dominated by China, forging economic links to new places like Canada or Sri Lanka – new nodes of trade that did not figure in his father's economic geography.

After I asked Rahul to tell me a little about where his father used to travel for trade, he replied, "He used to import [to Nepal] from India. [He traded between] India, China, and Nepal…and some of the items he exported out to Tibet, *but not internationally*" [emphasis added]. For Rahul, "international" trade involves dealing with people in places such as Singapore and Canada, outside of his father's long-standing route, which, according to him, is merely "local trade." Of course, from a state-centered perspective, this older, "local" route is indeed international, as it crosses national boundaries and is subject to international customs laws. But Rahul's claim that his father's trading geography was "not international" is still firmly rooted in a different kind of geographical representation that belies the state-centered logic of "national economies." Part of expanding his business to new locales involves making sure consumers know his products are attached to specific places that now have considerable value because of the geographical distance of their provenance, such as almonds from California and pepper from Vietnam. Although increasing mobility and travel is often considered one of the hallmarks of globalization, a different story is occurring here, one that involves staying put. Rahul finds that he only makes occasional, quick trips abroad; he mostly remains at his desk, making phone calls to Singapore.

Rina

Another, similar story concerning the generational expansion of trade involved three Kathmandu-based traders from two generations – Daya, an elderly man in his 80s, and his daughter and nephew in their 40s, all members of a prominent Newar family currently involved in the hotel and retail business. They spoke frankly about the spatial differences between three generations of traders. According to Daya, his father didn't travel along the Lhasa-Kathmandu-Kalimpong trade route; he would simply go to rural Tibet and buy woven woolen items (chubas and aprons) direct from the villagers, and bring them back to sell in Lhasa. That was the extent of his economic geography. Daya, on the other hand, was part of a family of 5 brothers, all of whom took turns conducting business in Lhasa. In the 1940s and 1950s, they each spent 4 years in Lhasa, alternating with 2 years in Kathmandu or Kalimpong, importing items that arrived via the ports of Calcutta or through Kashmir, such as coral, pearls, turquoise, and fabrics, and exporting musk, yak tails, wool, raw gold, and silver from Tibet. Now, over the past few years, Daya's daughter Rina has begun to fly to Thailand and Guangzhou at least 4 or 5 times a year to pick up new items for the supermarket that the family established in the late 1980s; she also orders gourmet items for wealthy foreign expats and Nepalis, such as French brie, American facial cleanser, and Australian milk in cartons. Rina noted that during her father's time, trade was "strictly a family business," associated with the Newar ethnic group, "but now, you find all sorts of people coming to Guangzhou from Nepal; there are all sorts of people doing trade."

Both Rina and Rahul's stories reflect the classic, hegemonic "success" stories of globalized Asian trade that I heard throughout my fieldwork, where successful traders are considered those who forge new business contacts with individuals living in far-flung locations, and whose imported products come from increasingly distant places. What often gets neglected in the celebratory discourses of the "new" Asian trade, and what I wish to show here, is how the inherent unevenness and contradictions of geographical development are both experienced and produced, and how multiple countermovements of place-making are in tension with state-based moves and success stories. Turning to a less fortunate group of traders, we see how competition due to changes in the geographies of infrastructural networks slows some down.

Directional Shifts: New Goods, New Geographies

Having a stack of business cards, as mentioned earlier, is integral for traders needing to make new contacts with suppliers, buyers, and distributors. They can also be indicative of the changes in the geographical direction and social restructuring of businesses. In Kathmandu, I was handed a business card with "Om Shanti Wholesalers: Retailer and Wholeseller Order Supplies for All Kinds of Chinese Goods" written in English on one side; on the other, "Worldwide Marriage Bureau Nepal: Your Life Time Partner." The proprietor grinned and told me about his venture to create an online international matrimonial service: "We needed to expand," he explained. In Lhasa, I was handed a business card for a new Taiwanese jewelry shop with Chinese on one side, Tibetan and English on the other. In Kalimpong, I was given a business card that said "*grocery, provision goods, and miscellaneous items*." But where "*grocery, provision*

goods, and miscellaneous items" was crossed out in ballpoint pen, "*MOBILES*" was handwritten in. In Siliguri, I received a card that read, "Electronics: Everything in Electronics; Automobiles; Imported Furniture." And in Sikkim, one man (who used to deal in wool) gave me a business card that advertised his supplies of Sony TVs, washing machines, mobile phones, DVD players, and toaster ovens. Clearly, and as stated in Chapter Three, traders who have been able to tap into the new economic networks linking North Bengal, Nepal, and Tibet with inland China now profit from selling Chinese-made products, or services that are not physically tied to the region such as online international dating websites.

Gyan and Jeevan

Gyan and Jeevan are two cousins in their 40s-50s who have had to create different sets of business cards each time they began to sell new products. They were some of the very first Nepalis who returned to Tibet in the 1980s to continue their family's trading business after the Sikkim-Tibet mountain passes closed in 1962, reorienting the majority of small-scale Tibetan trade to and through Nepal. The PRC's economic reforms in the mid-1980s – which included attracting foreign investors to port cities, establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in locales like Shenzhen, and opening up the TAR to tourists – were what chiefly prompted Gyan and Jeevan's move back to Lhasa, their fathers' town of business. They recalled what the economic atmosphere in Tibet was like at that time:

> Gyan: In 1985, it was very easy to do business. No road came from China to Lhasa.[64] We could supply everything [to Tibetans from Nepal]. You know,

[64] In actuality, roads to Lhasa from Sichuan, Qinghai, Yunnan, and Xinjiang were built in the 1950s, and a road to Nepal was built in the 1960s.

rice, sugar, wheat flour. Everything came from here. Medicine, herbs. Everything! You could supply to Tibet all the things…Bricks also, cement. And sand also! You can supply. They can build the buildings. And vegetables. You know that time, very good business. We can, in one truck, send the vegetables, and they can barter. They gave us *byi ru* (coral) and *g.yu* (turquoise). They can give. I was very happy. One truck, they give 5 kg, 10 kg [of stones]. At that time it had no value. But *gzi*, you know *gzi* (a precious Tibetan onyx stone)?

T: Yes.

G: That time, they can give more and more. We don't know (pretending to pick up a bead and examine it) what is this? (laughs).

T: What did you do with it?

G: We can use as money in Kathmandu market. At that time, we didn't know [what it was].

Gzi beads are highly coveted for their protective properties in inland China, and many traders now believe that there are no more real *gzi* or coral to be found in Tibetan markets. Gyan and Jeevan say that they were rather ignorant in the 1980s; they sold a lot of goods, but could have made a lot more money later on if they had known exactly what they were dealing with. In the late 1980s, when other Nepali traders began to get re-involved in the Tibet trade, the cousins realized that they were beginning to lose money due to increased competition in Lhasa. Taking advantage of Tibet's opening-up to foreign tourists, they began bringing Nepali handicrafts (such as homemade paper products with Tibetan symbols printed on them) to sell in Tibet.[65] At the beginning, their business fared well, because the transport of goods from Nepal to Tibet was considerably easier compared to other routes in China or India. Then in the mid-1990s, Gyan and Jeevan had to halt their handicraft business in Lhasa, citing two major reasons:

[65] As mentioned in Chapter Four, a lot of "culturally Tibetan" items in the tourist markets of Tibet are in fact made in Nepal.

competition and corruption. Over 15 years later, they noted that the exact same handicrafts that they had sent to Lhasa from Nepal still remain on the shelves. As Gyan says:

> Now there's very much competition, now I cannot sell Nepali handicrafts, [because] everybody brings illegally. We are bringing legally. But our price is very high. In 1990 I sent goods there [to Lhasa]. They are still there! I cannot sell. They are still there. Very difficult to do business now….That's why [their company name] now stopped the business. In 1985, everybody knew [our company]...Now people, from different places they come. We don't know who is who.

The decline of their handicraft business occurred around the same time the influx of Chinese migrant workers into Tibet reached its peak in the mid-1990s; Gyan and Jeevan therefore decided to switch to yet another product they thought would be viable. Today, they are the suppliers of steel rods and cement for construction projects in rapidly developing Lhasa. As steel rods are cheaper to manufacture in Nepal and to transport from Nepal to Tibet than from other parts of China, they figured that these items would be sure bets for a quick profit. In 2006, both cousins visited Tibet for a China-Nepal trade fair, but returned to Kathmandu, disappointed. At the fair, they were hoping for "actual business," but were concerned that the Chinese traders "were just talking for future business." According to Gyan, "They said they will take much quantity…one year, one billion tons. And we bring a sample there, and only talk! Not actually business… it's difficult to deal with Chinese people now. It is very difficult." Gyan and Jeevan also lament that the Chinese are now using inexpensive domestic cement for construction, not the Nepali cement that they used to supply.

With materials like cement becoming cheaper to produce, purchase, and transport from within the PRC, traders such as Gyan and Jeevan struggle to keep up with rapidly

changing geographical knowledge by expanding their networks to new locales or switching to more competitive products from different places. Although their networks might be expanding geographically – from a village in Nepal to a supplier in Singapore – a certain element of face-to-face business is felt to be lost. As both Rina and Gyan have expressed, "We don't know who is who" anymore. Similar to the narratives of decline discussed in Chapter Four, there is an historical pattern in capitalism of an increasing sense of alienation and the loss of trust as new, fleeting relationships displace long-term trade partnerships. Part of this sense of "not knowing who is who anymore" also results in a turn to a cultural argument for economic problems, sometimes slipping dangerously into anti-Chinese sentiments, exemplified by comments like "Chinese people are difficult to deal with," or, at other times, into ethnic self-deprecation or self-criticism, as explained below by another Nepali trader living in Nepal:[66]

> No pain, no gain is what I always say and tell my wife. We have to learn to make money too, it can't only be the Chinese, but now it is. Only the Chinese are making money in Tibet. What about us? The most dangerous thing is now Chinese come to Kathmandu to settle and do business. Let me give you just one example: apples. Nepalis used to sell them, but when the Chinese started taking over the market and moved here, they have very good connections with suppliers in China and they make one phone call and can get the whole shipment here quickly. Nepalis don't know how to compete. They can't compete…used to have the monopoly in Tibet, but not anymore.

This sense of alienation and lack of trust was noted by many of the mid- to large-sized traders in Lhasa, Kalimpong, and Kathmandu who were feeling hampered by increased competition and the dominance of traders directly linked to the paths of new Chinese capital (recall also the story of Tsering, the handmade *pang gdan* workshop owner in Lhasa in Chapter Four). "Opening up" spatial outlets to increase the flows of

[66] For a more in-depth analysis of how these ideas of self-deprecation are used in the Tibetan context, see Emily Yeh's article "Tropes of Indolence and the Cultural Politics of Development in Lhasa, Tibet" (2007b).

commodities sent from production centers in China yields a rather different experience on the part of some less-successful traders in Kathmandu, who feel cut off from interactions with other traders. In order to further draw out the experiences of traders who feel the spatial dimensions of a lack of sustained face-to-face interaction, I next turn to a story that demonstrates another kind of "geographical expression of the contradictions of capital" (Smith 1990: 152).

Geographies of Barter

There were very few tourists in central Kathmandu in April of 2006. The beginning of the trekking season is normally a popular time to visit Nepal, as the skies are relatively blue and clear prior to the heavy summer monsoon rains. During this April, however, the city was in turmoil. King Gyanendra – whose takeover of the government, complete dismissal of the Nepali parliament in 2005, and subsequent military rule sparked major protests amongst most citizens – had declared day-long curfews to curb the opposition. The US State Department had issued an order against non-necessary travel to the region, and many foreign tourists were cancelling their planned flights to Nepal. Tensions were very high, especially since staples like petrol and cooking oil were in great demand.

I sit in a jewelry shop with a Tibetan Muslim family I had met when first visiting Nepal as an undergraduate in 1997. Salima, the owner, and her daughters Fatima and Aisha are chatting while Fatima strings together small pieces of turquoise and fake coral to make earrings. I look out the door; the Kashmiri carpet sellers are sitting on the stoop and the bicycle rickshaw drivers are sleeping, and one Israeli tourist with dreadlocks

walks by, the first tourist in half an hour. Usually by this time of year, the streets fill up with tourists and hawkers, so to say business is bad this year is an understatement. We order meat dumplings and intestines for lunch, and eat them atop the glass cases of stones and jewelry.

Peering in the case and admiring the piles of rich blue lapis stones, I tell Salima that I know that lapis comes from Afghanistan or Iran, but ask how does she actually acquire them? Salima responds that men from Afghanistan come to Kathmandu with bags of lapis lazuli, and in exchange, she gives them silver necklaces, or rings. "Of course not really the Buddhist stuff like reliquaries. Sometimes we exchange, and sometimes we give them money," she says. I'm intrigued, since almost all of the traders so far have told me that they do not barter anymore, that barter was something that their grandparents did in the "old society." "Sometimes we don't have [enough] money," Salima says, "so you [ex]change." Her daughter Aisha adds, "It's not like we have cash available anytime, so here you don't need to give cash."

After this incident, I began asking more traders about barter. In Kathmandu, a man who sold *malas* (Buddhist prayer beads) said the following:

> Yeah, yeah, because people have not much money, they do like this. Tibetan women who come from Lhasa, when they didn't sell their things, they exchange with other things. … If they cannot sell, they need something, then they exchange and take. By force they do barter system. Many women come here to the shop, they exchange with *mala*. If they need something, *mala*, and if they didn't sell the things, they need these things, and they also have no money, then they take. That's by force!…By force! They are doing still. Before there was no money system, and people do barter system. Even today in the modern age, people do barter system – but by force. If I bring this [we are in his vendor stall shop and he animatedly pulls down objects such as bowls and plastic necklaces made with fake coral] from Lhasa, I cannot sell in Kathmandu, because there is no business. I sell very few, but this is a big town. I sell some, but I cannot sell [everything]. Then I take this for return. Then I go to my friend. 'You exchange with this.' I exchange with this [earrings of silver and turquoise] in

> Patan. And I exchange that thing with one football with one boy, and he gives me like a Chinese pot, it's made with marble, it looks nice, they make it cheaper. Then I exchange with him…

I take the use of the phrase "by force" to mean that they are forced to barter, that they have no choice in these circumstances. People barter when it turns out to be a more viable economic alternative. In Kalimpong, for instance, I went with my Tibetan friend Lhamo after lunch to go and meet an 84-year-old Marwari trader, Ramdev, and his grandson. In the old days, Ramdev said that wool from Tibet would be bartered with readymade clothes sold in Kalimpong. When I asked "But people don't barter anymore now, do they?" his grandson replied, "Oh, of course they do, they do all the time!" Lhamo, nodding, agreed. These days, they now exchange patterned silk from China with sacks of Kalimpong-made *kha btags* [Tibetan ceremonial scarves].[67] Norbu in Kathmandu says that these Kalimpong scarves are of lesser quality:

> Norbu: The nice *kha btags* [100-200 Nepali Rupees (1.40-2.90 US dollars)] come from Lhasa [a big markup from 4-5 yuan (0.50-0.63 cents)], and the lesser quality come from Kalimpong. Merchants come from Kalimpong to the shop to sell, and back in Kalimpong, they still barter these things for what they need.
>
> T: Yes, yes.
>
> N: The [Lhasa] *kha btags* are taken to India, [through] the barter system. If the Indian, the Nepali people, they take Chinese goods like *kha btags* or something like that, they mostly change with goods like something offering bowl, or something Indian like necklace, they'll bring here…when most of the Tibetans some like poor, they used to come here, if they do not have money, they can change. Some have turquoise, some have *mala*, they can change with mostly *bum pa* [vases], butter lamps, offering bowls.

In one early, influential study on cross-border trade in the western Himalayas, Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf claims that because "Indian commercial influence has reduced the scope" of the Sherpa salt-for-grain barter system, and as Sherpas are "more

[67] The raw materials for *kha btags* sold in Kalimpong often come from Orissa, but the printing of auspicious symbols, cutting, and separation are done in Kalimpong.

and more drawn into the monetary economy," the "barter system will soon vanish from memory" (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1975: 5; 3). Fürer-Haimendorf's assumption that there is an essential division between monetary and nonmonetary societies, or that a monetary economy "arrives" and erases a nonmonetary economy, is not quite accurate, as evidenced by the stories above. More significantly perhaps, wider, hegemonic economic geographies (such as "Indian commercial influence" in Fürer-Haimendorf's study or Chinese development initiatives in more contemporary accounts) might not limit barter practices but in fact ensure their continuation. Here, I would like to concentrate on what the use of barter might mean spatially.

Barter is often seen by both traders and scholars in two ways; as either a "lower level" of exchange in a hierarchy of economic practices, or as associated with a romanticized "egalitarianism" of the past. Instead, barter can occur at the same time as monetized forms of exchange, making special sense in contexts when cash is unavailable. As Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones have noted, "barter should be seen as one mode of exchange amongst others, not as the single means of running an economy" (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992: 6). Meanwhile, monetized exchange has become, itself, more diverse. As "successful" or "big" traders like Rina and Rahul increasingly use faster modes of financial transactions, phoning up their contacts in Singapore and Bangkok to order up almonds from California and brie from France on credit, their economic networks become more far-flung. Unlike barter, however, these faster, credit-induced processes cause the transfer or exchange of money and products to become much less visible.

There is credit and there is credit, however, so much so that stories about the use of credit also reflect differential relationships to trust and the temporality of exchange in the new economy. Interestingly, relatively well-to-do businessmen such as Dawa (recall his story about trying to make Tibetan handicrafts a "trend" in Chapter Four) say that purchasing items on credit was only done in the past:

> D: I think it was common before to take a long time, to take a raincheck, to wait like months. And it was even easy to get loans, like personally, between friends, or even from the neighborhood. But now, it's tough to get loans, and there's huge interest involved. People are just crazy about securing their selves.
>
> T: Are there forms of credit now?
>
> D: Um, very few. I mean, still credit is involved, but it's a pretty unusual thing right now. It's like cash, cash all the time. Immediately. Seriously. And it's gotta be real cash. Not duplicated, fake. It's crazy today. I guess that's...people are just forced to be like that right now, because of the environment. The social environment is just so...the whole environment is just crazy.

In contrast, some small traders who are struggling to make money say that they will delay exchange and sell items on credit – but only if they trust their customers. Take for instance a 30-year-old Sherpa woman in Lhasa who manages a small cosmetics stall and whose husband travels to Nepal every month to purchase new supplies. When she sells Indian and Nepali skin lighteners and shampoo to women from other urban places in Tibet such as Chamdo, Shigatse, and Gyantse, she says since they don't know each other, they must pay right away. In her corner of the main marketplace in Lhasa, however, since most people know and trust her, if they don't have money, she will let them pay her back 10 days later, sometimes even a year later. When a friend of hers bought some Nepali butter, he didn't pay her for 5 years. It turns out that he was in the United States during that time, but still finally came back to pay her.

The new Asian economy is producing extremely different kinds of spatially relevant exchange patterns. Barter and credit transactions conducted "by force" as a result of unevenness in flows of capital remain a way to survive for some traders. Such transactions rely heavily on the creation of visible personal networks and on selling specific items that are more immediately available for exchange. Although traders like Rina and Gyan complain that "no one knows who is who" anymore, some of the less successful traders who resort to barter do this "mostly in face-to-face situations, where people and the paths of goods are known" (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992: 6). The exchange of turquoise for an offering bowl, for instance, is used when money is unavailable; such a practice happens in a very specific time and place, nor does it always trump the use of money on other occasions. Thus, when money is limited, traders tend to foster more spatially compressed trading places, creating a different kind of economic geography that often gets neglected as a kind of geographical blindspot of its own. Trading practices such as barter are not often "seen" by scholars who are intent on characterizing the recent increase in global connections and communications in Asia as a phenomenon driven purely by monetary processes. Although it might seem as if time and space are compressed for Rina and Rahul, who have more immediate access to expanding global economic networks, in the case of these examples of barter, opposite processes appear to be occurring. Although Salima knows the Afghan lapis trader by name (and, as mentioned in Chapter Two, the Afghan-Tibetan Muslim trade connections have been in existence since the 17th century), it takes much longer for the Afghan trader to return to Nepal with new goods, causing this particular circuit of commodities to be spatially compressed but temporally extended.[68]

[68] Cindi Katz recognizes these processes of time-space expansion in her work in rural Sudan. After forests

As a clear example of the geographical construction of social fates, small traders who revert to barter tend to be those that do not have access to Chinese business networks. Rahul and Rina's geographical scopes are wider, and their commodities are bought and sold much faster than during their fathers' generation. Such spatial and temporal differences do not only divide generations, but also create further stratification between what is considered a "big" trader and a "small" trader, belying the notion that poorer or less successful traders will eventually "catch up" with the more successful ones if provided with enough modern provisions, tax breaks, or capital stimulus, an argument that is very often used by the Chinese government to promote economic development in Tibet.

These divisions have been seen throughout the narratives of the traders I have discussed here and in earlier chapters: while Ramesh travels to buy household appliances in warehouses in Guangzhou and plans to buy land near Nathu-la, Jigme is held still, unable to go across the border to Tibet to bring back packages of Chinese-made toilet paper because of the new ID laws. Unlike Rahul and Rina, who bring in foreign products from Vietnam and Australia to Nepal, Gyan and Jeevan find that they cannot sell Nepali products to China anymore, and in fact, have had to *stop* trading numerous times. Although the increasing development of Chinese and Indian-led infrastructural changes over the past 60 years or so has shifted power away from formerly important trading regions along the Lhasa-Kalimpong route, as we have seen, the processes of reconnecting "lost" places in blindspots can also occur through seemingly mundane, everyday

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south of Howa, Sudan, had been deforested due to the northern war effort, people in Howa found that agriculture and animal husbandry were only viable if they traveled longer distances to graze and to get wood (Katz 2001: 1224). As Katz argues, "From the vantage point of capital, the world may be shrinking, but, on the marooned grounds of places such as Howa, it appeared to be getting bigger every day" (Katz 2001: 1225).

practices such as bringing a rice cooker over the border to a family member, or bartering a scarf for a bowl.

New Economic Geographies

The opening of the passes and infrastructure projects being built across official borders paradoxically reassert China and India and Nepal as bounded states. As of 2006, those traders who sell Chinese goods seem to be doing relatively well compared to those who sell Nepali or Tibetan goods, who have found that they must either switch to Chinese goods or attempt to find a way to make certain *places* that have been cut off relevant once more. The balance of relative economic power along the Lhasa-Kalimpong route has shifted once more, and traders in the region are again palpably feeling the contradictions of capital expansion. As China forges new openings to increase economic development and the "freer" flow of trade, Tibet continues to be drawn more tightly into Chinese economic networks. At the same time, many traders in Nepal and India find themselves cut off from these networks, especially those who do not have relevant linguistic or social access. As a response to this wave of Chinese goods through newly opened spaces, traders reassert and re-fix their local geographies against new hegemonic geographies in varied ways. We have seen several instances, including the insistence on making the wool route stand as historically significant against the rhetoric of the Silk Road, and the reconstituting of face-to-face interactions and immediate exchange through barter.

That globalization processes produce inequality and are experienced differentially is not news. I have thus tried to take a step beyond the existing literature on globalization

and transnationalism to show how – in the face of hegemonic, large-scale economic changes – peoples' daily practices might in turn contribute to the shaping of regional geographies. It is not my intention in this dissertation to provide any predictions about the economic future of Asia, or the future of capitalism in general. What I hope to have shown is that there is a general historical pattern – from the micro scale of the commodity to the macro scale of the region – of tensions and contradictions between fixity and mobility, and that through local practices of circumventing state power, people make different kinds of places that are often neglected by state apparatuses. It is these complex tensions between moving and fixing, stopping and starting, opening and closing, that constitute the changing economic and social geographies of the region. Although many of the narratives in this study assert that the movement of capital in China is driving recent shifts in power and by doing so, is reasserting state control over its territory and boundaries, it is important to keep in mind the notion that we should not think of places (Kalimpong for instance) as merely "victims on the receiving end of globalization" (Massey 2002). Places, as we have seen, are actively and dynamically created and re-created by the individuals involved in their future.

Conclusion

Mobility and Fixity

By this point, I hope to have shown what Owen Lattimore understood all too well in the mid-20th century: that routes and frontiers "are shaped less by geographical conditions than by cultural momentum and the impact of those who created them" (Lattimore 1962: 384). Through the narratives of traders who have exchanged goods along routes that cross Tibet, India, and Nepal, this dissertation has demonstrated that while many traders' experiences have been influenced and altered by major economic transformations such as border closings and reopenings or the introduction of new commodities, they in turn shape their own trading geographies, often in uneven and unexpected ways. By paying particular attention to competing ideas of place (simultaneously actual and metaphorical), I have argued that the processes and struggles over making or "fixing" certain places against others are just as important, if not more so, than the relatively recent emphasis paid in anthropology and other disciplines to narratives of mobility.

Lived, everyday experiences play an important role in the creation and representation of routes of trade, whether at the Nathu-la border crossing in the early 20th century and again in 2006, or through the contemporary ordering of shipments of French brie to a supermarket in Kathmandu. The economic and political history of the Himalayan region has always been contingent upon tensions between mobility and fixity, and this is evident at every scale. The story of the traders who have exchanged goods along the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route is also the story of the geographical development

of inner Asia. But perhaps it is unsatisfactory to leave our story at this juncture. Much has been made of the past few years of the economic rise of China and India, and now with the apparent decline of the US empire and with much of the world in the midst of a deep recession, how might we make sense of this tiny slice of Himalayan trade amidst the larger story of global historical economic shifts? How might this kind of research lead to future steps in the theorizing of globalization processes?

In this conclusion, I point to some further implications in the study of large-scale economic shifts by addressing three related themes that have emerged from this research, themes that in many measures sum up its larger significance to the fields of anthropology and geography. First, I examine Lefebvre's notion of blind fields and question how we might conceptualize blind fields (or blindspots, as I have called them) in relation to the history of the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route and to globalization processes in general. Second, I emphasize the resilience of trading practices in the Himalayas despite border closings and seemingly potent shifts in modes of production. Third, and finally, since spatial expressions of fixity have been relatively neglected by scholars of globalization in favor of tropes of mobility, I suggest that closer attention be paid to the ways that fixing practices are inherent to both the survival of capitalism as well as to struggles against dispossession.

Blind Fields

For Lefebvre, the emergence of a "blind field" is the result of an ideological inadequacy that occurs during transitions between large-scale geo-economic shifts. Writing from the particular historical context of the 1968 revolt in Paris, Lefebvre voiced

his frustrations with the French Communist Party, specifically their tendency to ignore the urban as a new spatial form and to see it instead as a mere superstructural adjunct above the relations of production (Smith 2003: x). Because the urban is only seen "with eyes, with concepts, that were shaped by the practices and theories of industrialization…*reductive* of the emerging reality," according to Lefebvre, party members did not "see" the actual transitions and discontinuities in between industrialization and urbanization (Lefebvre 2003: 29).

Lefebvre's notion of the blind field applies well to the recent history of trade between Lhasa and Kalimpong in similar ways, both geographically and ideologically. First, the emphasis on state-based development projects turns certain trading places and practices into literal blindspots. For instance, the intensification of Chinese and Indian (and to a lesser extent, Nepali) infrastructural connections highlight "national economies" while obfuscating or blinding certain kinds of trading geographies located in between and across the margins of states. As we have seen, the focus on connecting the "ancient civilizations" of China and India in relation to the reopening of Nathu-la overlooks bypassed towns such as Kalimpong, as well as specific trading practices, such as barter or bringing rice cookers across the border in circumvention of trade restrictions. Seeing globalizing tendencies through the lens of the state economies of China and India obscures other complex trading places and practices that are produced in and across state borders.

Ideologically, much of the rhetoric of contemporary globalization processes concerns mobility, the shrinking of worlds, the erasure of borders, and the increase in transnational trade. But what this story seems to uncover is quite the opposite. Through

it we see what we have been blinded to: processes that involve *fixing* or making places more coherent. In the transition to an Asia-centered economy premised on overcoming territorial barriers for access to new markets, fixing practices have of course unfolded at the largest of scales: the laying-down of rail ties to extend the Qinghai-Tibet railway for example, or the implementation of trade restrictions on the Indian side of Nathu-la, or even the introduction of trucks in the 1950s, which displaced transporting separate automobile parts over the passes. All reiterated the coherence of national spaces and the power of those who profit from such coherence, even as they simultaneously facilitated the mobility of capital. Similarly, small-scale traders also employ place-fixing practices or narratives in order to reap profits, but these practices – such as making visible the different geography of the Wool Route in contrast to the Silk Road – often work against the more hegemonic kinds of practices enumerated above.

The Resilience of Trade

"Tibetans in Lhasa have a different mindset from us [Tibetans living in Kathmandu]. They have changed. Now they have a Communist mentality because they only think about money all the time."

Fatima, the daughter of the jewelry trader in Kathmandu introduced in Chapter Four, made this somewhat ironic observation in English during a conversation that revolved around the differences between her family in Nepal and some of her relatives in Lhasa. One could, of course, read the comment about "a Communist mentality" in many ways: a translation mix-up was the first thing that came to mind. But I couldn't shake off

the fact that I heard similar statements from others throughout my fieldwork. While sitting in an older Chinese Muslim man's house in Lhasa overlooking the vegetable vendors in one of the back alleyways in the older section of town, my friend recalled what education was like in China during the time of the Kuomintang. It was "helpful," he said, because Muslims were offered free accommodation, clothing, and education at mosques. At the time in the 1940s, he said, the "Chinese Capitalism Party" was just beginning to form, and as it was very poor, there was not enough money to provide for resources such as free education. Even though I asked if he actually meant the Chinese Communist Party, he kept referring to the CCP as the "Chinese Capitalism Party." Without wishing to make too much of these stories, I believe that the linguistic entanglement of capitalism and communism is actually reflective of traders' lived experiences of economic shifts.

It is tempting to argue that the history of trade in Tibet follows a trajectory based on distinct shifts in modes of production. In other words, it would appear on a very basic level that pre-1950 Tibet was capitalist (the CCP would argue "feudal"), then it became Communist ("liberated"), and after the 1978 reforms, it became subject to a post-socialist ("socialism with Chinese characteristics") plan to develop and securitize the "backwards" western areas of the nation. But, as the story here suggests, such simplified portrayals of macro political-economic shifts do not accurately represent the reality of what happens on the level of actual trading practices, where various modes of production overlap and are in tension with each other.

Shifts in large-scale economic geographies have less to do with capitalism or communism or any abstract changes in modes of production than they do with concrete

events, in this case, border closings and openings, the introduction of new commodities and materials such as makeup sets in the 1940s or silk apron thread from Chengdu in the 2000s, and the emergence of new kinds of infrastructure and modes of transport, exemplified by the shift from mules to trucks. There are thus never any clean temporal ruptures between modes of production: for instance, when Tibet "became Communist" in 1950, there was a period when huge capitalist profits were to be made by Tibetan and Indian traders selling Indian goods to the new influx of People's Liberation Army soldiers in Lhasa. Moreover, to take a current example, poorer, small-scale traders do not stop trading when faced with barriers to accessing profitable Chinese trading networks or the supposed "free flows" of globalized international trade. Instead, they survive by resorting to barter and other forms of capital exchange. Regardless of restrictions, and *despite* apparent major shifts in modes of production since the 1940s, trade in this region continued to evolve. So what may be seen on a macro level as an historical shift from some amalgam of feudalism and capitalism to communism is not so seamless. What is important for scholars of globalization to examine, then, is individuals' lived experiences and responses to major spatial transformations (e.g., border openings or closings), not necessarily how socio-historical shifts are tied to specific modes of production.

Uneven and stratified trading experiences are very much a result of Chinese (and to a lesser extent, Indian and Nepali) governments implementing intensified economic policies and development projects in order to open up borders for increased trade and national security. Even though most traders do not expect trade at Nathu-la to pull in massive amounts of revenue over the next few years, long-term plans such as opening the route to tourists in 2012 and the Chinese government's encouragement of foreign

investment in factories near Yatung indicate that this border region is earmarked as one of the many focal points for future development. Despite infrastructural fragility on the Indian side of Nathu-la (a real worry due to environmental hazards in the hilly, monsoon-prone area), there are now several additional openings for Chinese goods to be moved through other South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Middle Eastern borderlands. The proposal to extend the Qinghai-Tibet railroad up to Nepal and to Nyingchi, on the Assam border, is just one example of these many examples of "opening" that are in actuality fixing mechanisms.

Perhaps it is now time to take Owen Lattimore's work on inner Asian frontiers much more seriously. In 1953, Lattimore saw that "China is making a turn away from the coast and in towards the center…The development of industrial complexes is theoretically more profitable than the extraction of raw material but much of this territory is desert or poor. It is expected that the Chinese will go a long way in moving populations to deep hinterlands to build industrial centers..." (Lattimore 1965: 176). Indeed, this seems to be exactly what is happening. Both Chinese and foreign investment is building up the borderlands of Asia: urban Lhasa has expanded from 3 square km to over 53 square km in a period of 50 years, factories are being built in Yatung, and as of late 2008, over 21 billion yuan (3 billion dollars) has been earmarked for mining, construction enterprises, and food processing factories in the TAR (Xinhua 2008).

As Tibet turns into a regional center of inner Asia, it becomes at the same time more and more linked to the Chinese nation-state. The opening of borders for trade does not so much facilitate the "free flow" of goods as it reiterates – fixes – the coherence and the power of the state. Much of what seems to be happening on the national borders of

China echoes what Gerry Kearns has said regarding the United States' expansionist policies in 2006, that "the US will intervene in places where the inhabitants do not have the market-given right to explore (commercial) opportunities. The US will police a world in which borders are about markets and not territory" (Kearns 2006: 73, 87). Though it was Britain that "opened" Tibet through India in the early 20th century in order to increase imperial trade as well as to stave off potential Russian expansion, tensions between mobility and fixity are just as historically contingent today. In order for China to move commodities to new markets, it must overcome territorial obstacles such as mountains and open its national borders; at the same time however, these kinds of moves are supposed to maintain national security and quell dissent in the "unstable" western regions.

Mobility and Fixity: Directions in Anthropology and Geography

When I began writing up this research, I took part in my department's dissertation writing workshop, sending out half-formed chapters to peers who were willing to read and comment on them. One of my colleagues in the department (who himself is from Nagaland, one of northeastern states of India, and familiar with the landscape of the region) confessed that he felt physically exhausted after reading my chapters. He said he imagined himself travelling in a shared jeep from Darjeeling to Kalimpong, then perhaps taking a train to Siliguri, then taking a plane from Kathmandu to Lhasa. All of this "travelling" – through checkpoints, across monsoon-covered roads, while waiting to board a plane – frankly just made him tired. It is indeed jarring to read a dissertation that moves back and forth across three different countries and multiple towns during different

historical periods, but it may be necessary for anthropological research on evolving globalization processes to be a little geographically exhausting.

The movement of people or goods from Kalimpong to Lhasa – or from Kathmandu to Guangzhou, for that matter – has never been totally smooth and without incident. Instead of crafting an unbroken, fluid story of trade in the Himalayan region, I have explored various disjointed "snapshots" of trading practices and policies ("ethnographic fragments," as Anna Tsing has called them), not just "from below" or by "studying up," but on several spatial levels and for various temporal periods. These snapshots, while unavoidably selective, highlight the jostling experiences of moving and fixing, of having to pick up and relocate if a border is closed, or of having to switch to a more lucrative trading strategy in a different location. Even in the context of this research in 2006, when globalization was seemingly characterized by increased movement and fluidity, the emergent fixities in this region were extremely evident. Economic development projects in these border regions became sites for a variety of struggles over making coherent certain kinds of places against others. The reopening of Nathu-la prompted the emergence of groups for and against the reopening of Jelep-la, the marketing of non-Tibetan goods as "from Tibet," and the resilience of barter against barriers to trade are all practices that are often "unseen" if we focus too much on tropes of global mobility.

Why can't we just speak of examining the creation of "alternative geographies" of globalization, then? Why is looking at the tensions between fixity and mobility on multiple scales a better model for examining long-term globalization processes? In my opinion, the notion of "alternative geographies" of globalization – that is, various kinds

of place-making practices with motives and goals that differ from hegemonic capitalist ones – tends to elide the fact that practices of trade are not always "alternatives." In fact, as we have seen, traders rarely work directly against hegemonic geographies and at times work to reinforce them. Take, for example, traders who have named their Kalimpong-based shop "Silk Road Trading Company" even though they believe it was always located on the "wool route," or those who have marketed items produced in Guangzhou or Nepal as genuinely "Tibetan" in order to reap the benefits of Chinese development and gain a monopoly price. Much like Anna Tsing's argument regarding "unexpected collaborations," a glimpse at these unusual and often paradoxical tensions between practices of mobility and fixity moves us beyond reducing global processes to modes of production and beyond the idea that "solidarity means homogeneity," or "hegemony means capitalism" (Tsing 2005: 245). Taking into account the surprisingly awkward bedfellows that are sometimes produced in struggles over making places coherent raises the need for more in-depth studies of the very contradictory experiences of long-term, global economic shifts.

If anthropology has been typically characterized by an ethnographic methodology that involves examining culture on a small scale via long-term fieldwork, and if geography is seen to focus on larger-scale human interactions with place and the environment, the study of cross-border experiences of globalization necessarily demands that we forge connections between traditionally bounded disciplines and borrow from other methodologies and theoretical canons. If blindspots are partly the result of ideology, there is no reason why we can't explore how blindspots are created between disciplinary boundaries as well.

Perhaps it is time to rethink mobility. In the socio-historical evolution of trade in the Himalayas, fixity and mobility have always gone hand-in-hand at every scale, but what we seem to be blinded to are the intense struggles over fixing place in moments of economic transition. Structures that are built in order to facilitate trade, such as new roads in Sikkim, or the introduction of new modes of transportation (be they yaks, railroads, cars, or trucks) are also sites where opposing groups struggle to make their own trading places coherent or visible. There is therefore a great need to go beyond talking about the fact that contradictions or tensions or paradoxes simply *exist* at borders. Greater ethnographic attention needs to be paid to individuals' complex experiences of spatial transformations such as border openings or closings, asking how they fix or make their own trading places in relation to these major geographical shifts.

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Appendix A

A Note on Research Methods

My research methodology warrants a bit more explanation than has been given in the body of the project. In this appendix, I briefly touch on some issues regarding surveillance, research permits and visas, interview languages, and smuggling.

Anthropologists tend to spend a significant amount of time living with local families in order to gain cultural insights that might not otherwise result from sporadic interview sessions. In Lhasa, however, since foreigners are forbidden to stay in places that are not officially authorized to host foreigners (such as certain hotels and all private residences), living with a Tibetan family would have required a special permit from the Public Security Bureau (PSB). Because of this restriction, my partner and I ended up living for 6 months at a hotel in the old section of Lhasa, and I would venture out from there each day to conduct interviews. Although this arrangement was not ideal, it did allow for us to live centrally, and provided us with some privacy.

In a heavily surveilled city like Lhasa, the creation of a sense of paranoia is not uncommon, as addressed by other researchers who have worked in the city, such as Emily Yeh (2003) and Robert Barnett (2006). Surveillance techniques such as software programs that detect keystrokes in emails, wiretapping, and the presence of plainclothes "minders" are part of everyday life for many people in the city. Because there is no way to know if and when any of these methods are actually being employed, it is more often *not* knowing that fuels paranoia. For instance, one day in Lhasa, a young monk approached me at the gate to my hotel and asked me for a *par* (Tib., photograph). I

assumed he meant a photograph of the Dalai Lama, which is illegal to possess in the TAR. Since most people in Lhasa are aware of this restriction, and I knew that the gate of the hotel was constantly watched, I figured he must have been a spy of some sort. As the monk kept pressing me for a photograph, I pretended that I thought he meant that he wanted me to take a photograph of him (*par rgyag* means "to take a photo"). As I took out my camera, he quickly walked away from the gate. In the end, however, I had no way of telling whether or not my assumption was correct, if my actions were simply foolish, or if I failed his "test" and that I would be deported. It was this kind of buildup of worry that permeated a lot of my fieldwork in Tibet.

There are strict official regulations for conducting academic research in India and China. In the TAR, I was kindly given official research permission and visa clearance through the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences (TASS) and the Tibet and Himalayan Digital Library to conduct research on material culture and old trading practices in Lhasa only, with a few side trips to other major cities in Tibet. In India, I received a research visa through the Ministry of Education of the Government of India, and arranged affiliation with the International Trust for Traditional Medicine in Kalimpong. In Kathmandu, I was able to obtain permission for research through Tribhuvan University. Although I would have liked to have travelled along much of the length of the trade routes, it is nearly impossible to conduct research near or on any national borders for obvious reasons: they are extremely sensitive, militarized zones. My methodology therefore relied on staying within the cities of Lhasa, Kalimpong, and Kathmandu, chatting with elderly traders who recalled their memories of pre-1962 trade, and interviewing younger traders that often came back from border trading that very day.

In Kalimpong and Kathmandu, I mostly used English with a spattering of Nepali during interviews, although a few times I needed to rely on the translation skills of the relatives of elderly traders if their first languages were Newari or Marwari. In Lhasa, my Tibetan was adequate enough to conduct simple interviews, and improved quite a bit over the course of a couple of months. Perhaps the biggest drawback to my research in the TAR, however, was my inability to speak adequate Chinese. Although I could successfully buy eggs at the grocery store or bargain with bicycle rickshaw drivers, I was not in a position to interview anyone on my own. While in Lhasa, I specifically asked TASS to help me find someone who could assist me in case I needed to interview Chinese-speaking shopkeepers. She turned out to be absolutely invaluable as a collaborator, not just during the few Chinese-language interviews that I needed to conduct, but also during several note-taking sessions after Tibetan language interviews. As many individuals in the TAR understandably refused to be tape-recorded, I would conduct interviews by taking down brief notes, and then type them up as soon as possible. If Tsam-la was with me, she would also take notes, and we would head to a tea shop afterward to compare our writings and discuss the interview. This method of collaborative note-taking was very useful, as there were times where she would remember crucial parts of the conversation that I didn't, and vice versa. I never brought up politics in my interviews in the TAR, and in fact, some of the braver interviewees would ask me bluntly at the beginning of our conversation, "this isn't about politics, is it?" Open-ended interviews included questions such as "what were some of the commodities that you traded?" and "how have things changed since your parents' generation?" But occasionally, attitudes towards Chinese governance in the TAR would

seep through some of the answers, and I would often feel uncomfortable during these moments.

Trade, especially cross-border trade, is often associated negatively with smuggling prostitution, drugs, and general illicitness. One of the questions I am frequently asked is whether or not I encountered any evidence of drugs, arms, or human trafficking across borders. As exemplified by the story of Jigme and his trading experiences, Carolyn Nordstrom has accurately shown that even though one would suspect drugs travel along a "drug route," and arms along a separate "arms route," they in fact get mixed up and travel along the same channels. Although I heard plenty of low-level smuggling stories, I actively avoided asking questions about such things. However, I did find myself in a couple of sticky situations at the beginning of my fieldwork. As soon as friends knew I was interested in studying trade, many people would offer to take me to see all kinds of traders. I accepted most invitations, visiting cheese traders, wool traders, medicine traders, and cosmetics traders, who would of course not stick to selling those single categories of items. In order to illustrate how the legal and extra-legal are entangled in trade, here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes when I went to visit a semi-precious stone trader:

> Then the guy reaches into a cupboard and pulls out a small wooden statue, about the size of my palm, which fits into a wooden reliquary box, and then, whispering, he pulls out a huge *tsa tsa* [clay votive objects that are created as part of meditation practice], which is wrapped in a pink towel and placed in a China Mobile box – both of these, apparently, are from X [the name of an old monastery]. Then he makes motions like he is hiding the wooden box in his pocket, and says that it was difficult to do the same with the *tsa tsa*. I am visibly worried, and Y says he has nothing to do with this, he just buys them when they are on the market – monks must steal them and sell them. Aiee. As we sit in piles of things from Bhutan, Afghanistan, the far reaches of China, Mongolia, and Tibet, I have no idea how all these things got here, what are real, what are fake, what are stolen, what are legitimately family

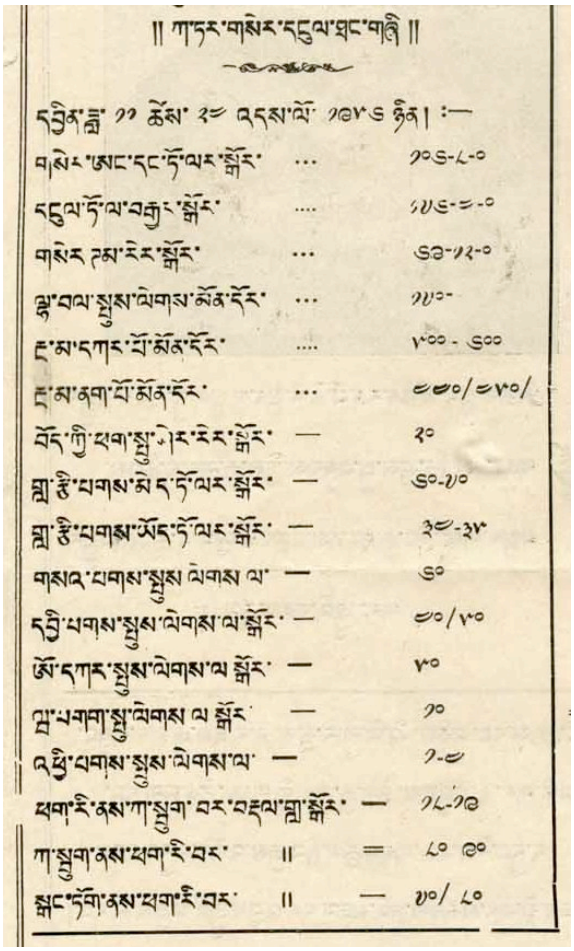
> heirlooms. Rather boggling. I begin to get scared that there are gangsters looking in the windows, demanding money or compensation for something.

After another similar incident, I stopped accepting invitations to visit all traders and tried to concentrate on the seemingly more benign wool trade. I do appreciate the generous help by the traders who knew I was interested in trade and took me around to various merchants, but I simply could not continue witnessing and turning my back on practices that I knew were explicitly breaking the law. Dealing with items that were clearly taken from monasteries definitely fits into this category.

Since I lack adequate formal Chinese language abilities and need to improve my Tibetan reading and writing skills, I was unable to consult important documents such as historical Chinese gazetteers. There is also a significant gap in data concerning Tibetan and Chinese politics between the 1960s-1980s, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. I mention these deficiencies because I have just scratched the surface on Tibetan trade, and it is my hope that the next generation of researchers who speak and read both Chinese and Tibetan fluently (especially native Tibetan speakers) can correct and/or add to these findings.

Appendix B

Excerpts from the *Tibetan Mirror*



|| ཀ་ཁར་གསེར་དངུལ་གང་གི ||

དབྱིན་ལྗོངས་ ༡༡ ཆོས་ ༢༥ འདས་ལོ་ ༡༩༥༦ ཀྱིན། :—

གསེར་ཚང་དང་དོ་ལར་སྒོར་	...	༡༠༦-༨-༠
དངུལ་དོ་ལ་བརྒྱར་སྒོར་	....	༡༧༦-༤-༠
གསེར་རྐམ་རིར་སྒོར་	...	༦༩-༡༢-༠
ལྷ་བལ་སྤུས་ལེགས་མོན་དོར་	...	༡༧༠-
ཇ་མ་དཀར་བོ་མོན་དོར་	....	༨༠༠ - ༩༠༠
ཇ་མ་ནག་པོ་མོན་དོར་	...	༤༤༠/ ༤༨༠/
བོད་ཀྱི་ཕག་སྤུ་ཤེར་རིར་སྒོར་	—	༢༠
ཐུ་རྡོ་ཕགས་མེ་དོ་ལར་སྒོར་	—	༥༠-༧༠
ཐུ་རྡོ་ཕགས་ཚོད་དོ་ལར་སྒོར་	—	༣༤-༣༨
གསལ་ཕགས་སྤུས་ལེགས་ལ	—	༥༠
དབྱི་ཕགས་སྤུས་ལེགས་ལ་སྒོར་	—	༤༠/ ༨༠
ཚོལ་དཀར་སྤུས་ལེགས་ལ སྒོར་	—	༨༠
བྱ་ཟགག་སྤུ་ལེགས་ལ སྒོར་	—	༦༠
འཇྲི་ཕགས་སྤུས་ལེགས་ལ	—	༢-༤
ཕག་རིའི་ནས་ཀ་སྤྲུག་བར་བརྡལ་བྱ་སྒོར་	—	༡༧-༢༥
ཀ་སྤྲུག་ནས་ཕག་རིའི་བར	॥ =	༧༠ ༥༠
སྒང་ཏོག་ནས་ཕག་རིའི་བར	॥ —	༧༠/ ༧༠

*a tola is an Indian unit of weight roughly equivalent to 11.66 grams

Market Prices in Gold and Silver from Calcutta	
November 24, 1956:	
Best gold per tola*	106-8-0
Silver per 100 tolas	176-4-0
Gold coin, each	69-12-0
Best quality wool from Lhasa per maund	170-
White yak tails per maund	800-900
Black yak tails per maund	440/480/
Tibetan pig-hair bristles, each	20
Musk without skin, per tola	60-70
Musk with skin, per tola	34-35
Best quality snow leopard hide	60
Best quality lynx hide	40/80
Best quality red panda hide	80
Best quality fox hide	10
Best quality marmot hide	1-4
Transport costs from Phari to Kalimpong	18-19
From Kalimpong to Phari	80-90
From Gangtok to Phari	70/80



An advertisement for Tharchin's own brand of *bal shad* (wool carding combs), which were manufactured in Kalimpong (note Urdu, Hindi, and Tibetan on stamp). This clipping is taken from the Vol. 10, No. 1, Pp. 16b issue of the *Tibetan Mirror* newspaper (June 28, 1938).

Wool Carding Combs

A very useful, top quality and strong carding comb for the female wool carders. Please check whether or not the "woman carding wool label" is there when you make your purchase.

*

[*] Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy has noted that the Tibetan word for "label," "trademark," or "brand" (*lam 'bar*) "is held to be a Tibetan phonetic adaptation of either 'number' or 'label' in Indian English," since many foreign products were more easily distinguished by their image (e.g. "peacock brand" soap) than by their written name. The term *lam 'bar* was also used to nickname *nang ma* (Tibetan classical music) singers and prostitutes; according to Henrion-Dourcy, *sha bag leb lam 'bar* (meat-filled bread label) was the nickname for a woman whose mother sold such bread, and *sna rtug lam 'bar* (snot label) was likely often seen with a runny nose (Henrion-Dourcy 2005: 204, n. 22).