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Trading places: New economic geographies across Himalayan borderlands

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A B S T R A C T

Major state-led infrastructural development projects in the Himalayan region have been underway for several years, such as the building of highways connecting Nepal and Tibet, the widening of roads throughout North Bengal, Sikkim, and Tibet, and the planning of extensions to the Beijing–Lhasa railroad. Some of these projects – driven by the need to open up new markets for surplus commodities in the name of "free" trade and bilateral cooperation – have led to the rerouting of established trade routes and increased environmental damage to the region's hilly topography. In an area of Asia that has long been characterized by geographical representations highlighting its supposed marginality and remoteness (for example, "the chicken's neck" or "the roof of the world"), these searches for new openings for capital have led to 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 article takes as its basis oral narratives of traders in the region, demonstrating how the re-routing of trade routes have often resulted in diverse attempts to make trading goods and places more coherent in the face of such powerful economic shifts. I argue for the need to avoid simple "top–down" vs. "bottom–up" models of hegemony and 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.

Introduction: the Chicken's neck and the yam

Perhaps with the exception of "Tibet, the Roof of the World," several representations of the Himalayan region are rather unflattering. 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 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). There is also Nepal, sometimes considered "the proverbial yam sandwiched between two boulders" of China and India (Turin & Shneiderman, 2003: 8). The attachment of images to places is laden with meaning; in these particular cases, the areas delineated by national or state boundaries are recognized as not especially important to the surrounding territory, since they are frequently placed on the edge of, or in-between political "systems of space" (Shields, 1991: 3).

Those in the Himalayas (or "the chicken's neck" or "yam" for that matter) often find themselves having to justify their existence within national discourses that often give way to centers of political power – Beijing and Delhi, for instance – far removed from the realities of everyday life in the mountainous region that loosely includes Sikkim and northern Bengal, northeastern India, Bhutan, eastern Nepal, and Tibet. Representing a spatial scale that is neither national nor global, a regional scale matters significantly for many people living in this area because of various long-standing economic, social, and cultural connections (van Schendel, 2002; Scott, 2009; Shneiderman, 2010). This is especially significant for a region that is often obscured by current media discourses focusing on nation-state-based analyses of new infrastructure projects, led by the huge "rising economies" of India and China (see for example Economist, 2010a, 2010b; Economic and Political Weekly, 2005). Following others who have maintained that frontiers are shaped less by geographical conditions than by the impact of those who created them, I argue for the need to look more closely at transformations of territory in spaces that national maps conceal or ignore (Lattimore, 1962: 384; Ludden, 2003: 1070). If spaces are not simply "there," but are instead produced by those who have various claims over them, the broader challenge, then, is to investigate *how* representations of space are rooted in history and

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produced, conditioned, structured, and experienced in everyday life (de Certeau, 1988; Lefebvre, 1991).

In this article based on ethnographic narratives from field research in Kalimpong, India; Kathmandu, Nepal; and Lhasa, Tibet/China; I focus on individual traders' differential experiences of the effects of recent infrastructural developments in the eastern Himalayan region through the paths of the commodities they exchange, arguing that these traders' new economic geographies become both a response to and part of the new geographies of a heavily China-driven Asian economy. Recent shifts in borderland infrastructure such as the Nathu-la border reopening between China and India or the railroad linking Beijing to Tibet have led to changes in long-standing commodity pathways and increasing inequality between the traders who have access to the new commodity flows and those who do not. In turn, traders negotiate such transformations in the speed, direction, relative location – and hence value – of the goods they trade. This is articulated in two main ways: a) geographically diverting products to and from different locations, and b) diversifying exchange practices by dealing with different kinds of commodities (such as moving from Nepali flour to Vietnamese pepper), or even returning to older forms of exchange such as barter. The story of contemporary shifts in trade in the Himalayan borderlands is not as much about an unfettered flow of Chinese goods "flooding" the Nepali, Tibetan, and Indian borderlands as it is about the stopping, restarting, and diverting of older paths of commodities.

What exactly is happening in these borderlands of India and China, then? As China is extending its capital development westwards into Tibet and searching for new markets in South and Southeast Asia, old Sino-Indian border passes are being re-opened, bypassing former trading hubs like Kalimpong in West Bengal. By looking toward proposed extensions to the Qinghai–Tibet railroad and future border openings as opportunities for new market niches, many young traders in the Himalayas are beginning to create new trading networks, forging tighter connections with major industrial centers in southern China, and turning away from the trade routes of their parents and grandparents. Apart from some very interesting work on economic development and flows of people and goods across India and Tibet (see for example Fischer, 2005; McDuie-Ra, 2012; Yeh, 2009), what often gets neglected in the discourses on the pathways of the "new" Asian trade is how the inherent unevenness and contradictions of geographical development are both experienced and produced, and how multiple counter movements of place-making are in tension with state-based moves and success stories.

Material pathways and methods

Scholarship on world historical systems, such as Philip Curtin's study on world trade (1984) and Fernand Braudel's writing on European capitalism (1982), feature 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. Tying together narratives of trade practices with broader, geographically informed perspectives on shifts in capital is significant because it directly addresses a seemingly simple but methodologically challenging question: how does one even begin to connect ethnographic studies of small-scale commodity exchanges with rapid economic change at a more regional level?

Within fields that place a heavy emphasis on everyday experience, those who work on commodity chains or the "follow the thing" method of investigating the role of commodities in social life have also attempted to forge such connections through the use of ethnographic frameworks and methods. These have been useful for thinking through the processes of production, exchange, and consumption in conjunction with socially produced and changing meanings of objects (Appadurai, 1986; Bestor, 2001; Kopytoff, 1986; Marcus, 1995). However, *actually* following things or people, or attempting to trace the overlapping processes of production and exchange to consumption is somewhat easier said than done (Harris, 2007). Because this often involves a methodology which breaks down when confronted by restrictions at national borders (e.g. difficulty in attaining long-term access in sensitive or militarized areas in India and China), the research for this project was conducted with traders in three locations: Kathmandu, Kalimpong, and Lhasa – cities from where traders would conduct daily business transactions across borders.

The initial contacts for this project were several individuals involved in the semi-precious stone and textile trade whom I first met during a trip to Tibet and Nepal in 1997. Because I wished to look at changes in cross-border trading networks and family linkages over a period of several decades, I did not select the rest of the traders based on a random sampling method. Instead, through these initial contacts (who were fairly well-connected to other groups of traders throughout the region), I asked to speak to elderly men and women who were involved in the Lhasa–Kalimpong trade prior to the Sino-Indian border closing in 1962, who then introduced me to their cross-border trading partners and family members. Interviews were with approximately 100 male and female traders over 18 months during 2005–2006, and were conducted in Tibetan in Tibet, and in English amongst those who were living in India and Nepal.

These traders emphasized their longstanding economic connections with traders living in the three cities of Kalimpong, Kathmandu, and Lhasa; I tried as best as I could to interview members of two generations – an older generation who remembered what trading across the Himalayan mountain passes was like in the 1940s and 1950s, and those who were more recently involved in trade in the era that was marked by post-1978 reforms in China as well as a very different set of transportation technologies. This approach – recording and analyzing narratives that demonstrate how a diverse group of traders direct and influence the kinds of (and geographical direction of) commodities across borders – is particularly significant in this region of Asia where people from multiple ethnicities, language groups, religions, economic classes, and castes interact. Thus, this is not about "Tibetan trade" or "the Chinese economy," as if a sole ethnic group or nation could represent multiple trajectories of flows of money and commodities. Instead, these traders are linked primarily by their relation to the older material pathways of their goods, and – taking a cue from Janet Roitman's work on economic citizenship and Mika Toyota's occupational identities – they are but one of the plural sovereigns of this region (Roitman, 2005; Toyota, 2000). Thus, an oral narrative approach was central to this project, for I wished to pay specific attention to differential descriptions of trade journeys, exchange practices, and conceptions of the boundaries of the Himalayan region in order to understand how "on the ground" experiences of trading and journeying bump up against more abstract representations, such as a map of the region. Furthermore, the way these traders understand and re-define "the international" and "the regional" often opposes the geographies of macro-economic policies in this region.

Many existing studies have built upon the role of the trader in long-distance or transnational trade by highlighting their experiences of geographical changes to cross-border networks and practices (Abraham & van Schendel, 2005; Doevenspeck, 2011; Hansen, 2000; Jones, 2012; Nordstrom, 2007; Stephen, 2007; Walker, 1999). They are also attentive to moments of impasse at borders, and therefore relatively critical of the fact that studies of