

ASIAN BORDERLANDS



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Edited by Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang

# The Art of Neighbouring

Making Relations  
Across China's Borders

Amsterdam  
University  
Press

## The Art of Neighbouring

# Asian Borderlands

Asian Borderlands presents the latest research on borderlands in Asia as well as on the borderlands of Asia – the regions linking Asia with Africa, Europe and Oceania. Its approach is broad: it covers the entire range of the social sciences and humanities. The series explores the social, cultural, geographic, economic and historical dimensions of border-making by states, local communities and flows of goods, people and ideas. It considers territorial borderlands at various scales (national as well as supra- and sub-national) and in various forms (land borders, maritime borders), but also presents research on social borderlands resulting from border-making that may not be territorially fixed, for example linguistic or diasporic communities.

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# The Art of Neighbouring

*Making Relations Across China's Borders*

*Edited by  
Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang*

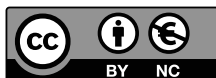
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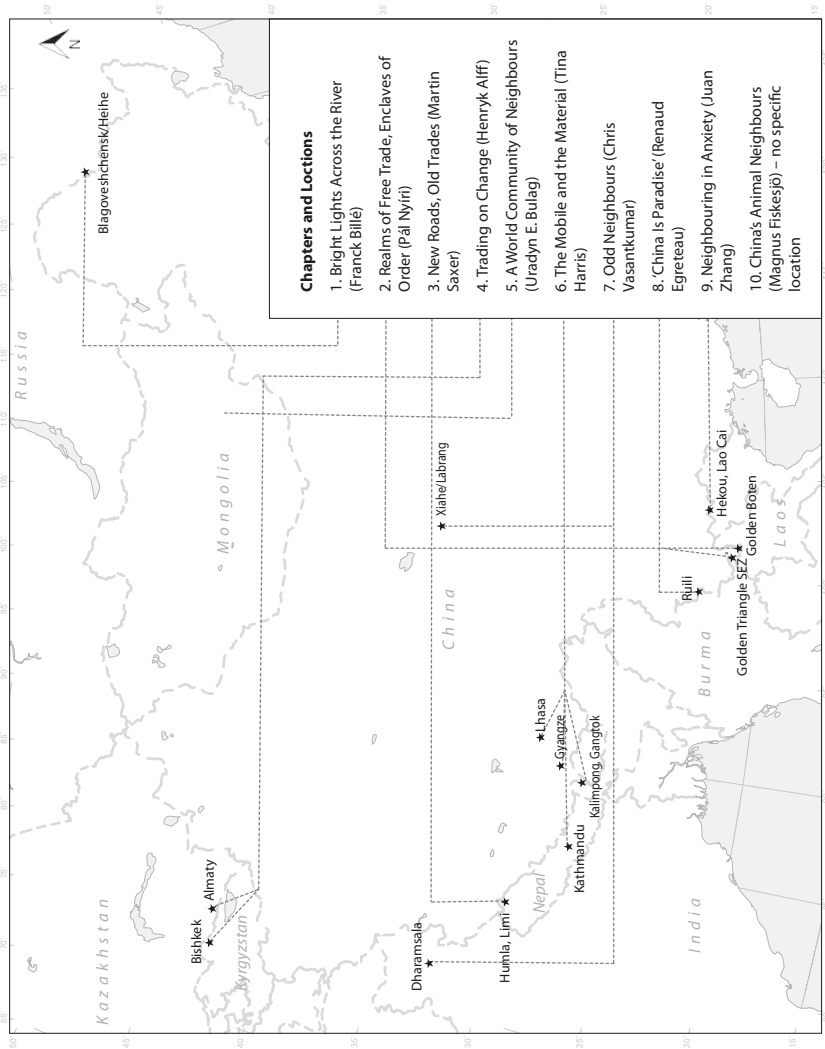
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Figure 0.1 Overview map of locations



Design: Martin Saxer, 2016

## Foreword and Acknowledgements

This book is the fruit of a long journey that started with a conference entitled “The Art of Neighbouring: Old Crossroads and New Connections along the PRC’s borders” held at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, in March 2012. This conference brought together scholars of different disciplines and regions and developed a comparative perspective on the ways in which China’s rapid economic growth, its strategic decisions to foster trade, secure influence, and access natural resources affect the lives and futures of the people living on both sides along its borders. China has in recent years embarked on a more assertive approach to redefine its role in the region. At the same time, China’s strategy to portray its rise as peaceful and benevolent continues to be relevant. These at times contradictory realities are the starting point for the contributors of this book to reflect on the common experiences and situated practices of neighbouring China.

Much of the current discussion on China’s rise and its growing global and regional influence concerns geopolitical and macroeconomic issues; it is largely based on state-centred policies and the various nuances of official rhetoric. Yet an important part that is missing in the discussion is the borderland itself and the people dwelling there. Borderlands are crucial junctures through which the increasing flows of raw materials, commodities and people are channelled. Looking from the borderlands back to the centres contributes to new insights into the region’s dynamic interconnectedness.

This book investigates the various meanings and modalities of neighbouring across Chinese borders. The title of this book suggests that neighbouring is an art of mediating relations against the background of peace and turmoil, hopes and fears. Neighbouring, as the contributors of this book show, helps us recognize evolving interactions between nations, territories, geo-political positionalities, historical connections, movements of people, as well as locally narrated identities.

This book would not have been possible without the efforts and patience of all contributors who have worked tirelessly over the years on this project. As editors, we wish to thank the Asia Research Institute for organizing the 2012 conference, and especially Prasenjit Duara and Brenda Yeoh for their support. Our thanks also go to Liang Yongjia, Malini Sur, Philip Fountain, Hyunjoon Shin, Max Hirsh, Dru Gladney, Oscar Martinez, Tom Cliff, Xiang Biao, Jeffrey Robin, Itty Abraham, T.G. Suresh, Thongchai Winichakul, Chris Lyttleton, Wang Gungwu, Michael Feener, and Johan Lindquist for

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# Introduction

Neighbouring in the Borderworlds along China's Frontiers

*Juan Zhang and Martin Saxer*

For it is a simple matter to love one's neighbour when he is distant, but it is a different matter in proximity. – Jacques-Alain Miller (1994)

A near neighbour is more helpful than distant kin. – A Chinese proverb

Over the past decades, living in proximity to an increasingly powerful China has gained new meanings. 'Rising China' – the nation, the notion, and the buzzword – sparks dreams and triggers fears. Borders that were closed during the Cold War era have again become zones of contact and exchange. Old trade routes are revived, new economic corridors established, and remote border towns turned into special zones. Tales of entrepreneurial success spread wide and stimulate hopes for trans-regional development. At the same time, security concerns remain high, territorial disputes still loom large, and minorities from northern Burma to Tibet, Xinjiang and Tajikistan continue to seek autonomy.

In this context, engaging in multiple neighbouring relations has become a necessity for those living in these zones of contact and exchange. The experiences and realities of relation-making across China's borders shape life in profound and lasting ways. However, these experiences and realities of everyday neighbouring receive less analytic attention than they deserve. Current debates on China's relations with its neighbours tend to focus on questions of economic influence, military power, and diplomatic strategies; both academic and public attention is directed towards topics such as China's territorial claims in the South China Sea or China's new regional initiatives such as 'One Belt One Road' (*yidai yilu* 一帶一路) that aims to revive the Silk Road and gain influence in Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Smaller-scale processes of exchange along the 22,000 km of land borders that 14 countries share with China usually remain out of sight. At best, they make headlines as individual cases of economic success or political unrest; hardly ever are they put in relation to each other. Everyday interaction and exchange across the Himalayas, for example, is seldom seen against the background of similar experiences in Siberia or Burma.

The oversight of important everyday processes of neighbouring along the edges of Asia's rising powers, and the lack of a comparative framework to capture them, are the challenges this book seeks to address. This book starts with a simple question: What does China's rise mean for its immediate neighbours? Looking beyond extensive political analysis prepared by think tanks, and newspaper headlines on high level summits, trade deals, collaborations and disputes, this book presents lived realities of shared dreams and fears. Authors of this book bring forward a comparative framework that allows us to understand seemingly disparate processes in places as far apart as Kyrgyzstan and northern Vietnam as pieces of a larger puzzle. Rather than treating the frontier zones as remote peripheries at the edge of nation-states, we conceptualize them as crucial junctures that hinge a considerable part of Asia together. We argue that these junctures present a vantage point to see and understand the dynamic and ongoing reconfiguration of post-Cold War Asia in new ways.

Our aim with this book is thus two-fold. First, we seek to gain a better understanding of the contemporary cross-border relations at various scales. We look into everyday practices of exchange and interaction and ask what China's rise means for the people living on both sides of the borders, how their lives and futures are conditioned by the geopolitics of post-Cold-War Asia, and which strategies they employ to deal with new regimes of control and (partially) open borders.

Second, we propose neighbouring as an analytical notion for an anthropological inquiry into relatedness, competition, and ways of being in a world in which communities become increasingly mobile and connected. As it stands, neighbouring has remained an under-theorized social relation. While many forms of neighbouring are implicitly at the core of classic anthropological studies, they have mostly been discussed in terms of kinship (especially ethnographic writings of 'fictive kinship'), ethnicity, nation, class, caste or community. In other disciplines, neighbouring has not been studied in its own right, despite the fact that the term appears frequently in international relations (IR), politics, security studies and urban planning.

This book takes the experiences and politics of relation-making across China's borders as a starting point of an anthropological inquiry into neighbouring. Neighbouring is thereby understood as both agency and experience. It involves, at once, mental and material processes; it entails techniques of negotiating proximity and makes use of asymmetries in power and wealth; it informs desire and stimulates distrust; and it denotes

collective and individual efforts to manage evolving relations that we will call agonistic intimacies.

In this introduction, we first discuss how neighbours and neighbouring are defined, and trace the historical roots of neighbouring between China and its neighbours by looking into the meta-narrative of tributary relations and the question of governance and autonomy. Then, we situate the terrain of our inquiry in the borderworlds that straddle Chinese frontiers and sketch out the geopolitical transformation of post-Cold War Asia as the backdrop against which contemporary neighbouring unfolds. On the basis of this brief sketch of historical background and post-Cold War context, we explore the contemporary characteristics of neighbouring relations. We look into the politics of proximity and distance, and reflect on agonistic intimacies that define neighbours and neighbouring. We conclude this introduction with an overview of the chapters, showing how each of them helps illuminate the larger project of the book.

## The Neighbour

Before we delve into an analysis of ‘neighbouring’ or even ‘the art of neighbouring’ as a shared experience and practice, it is important to first define who is a ‘neighbour’ and what it means to be a ‘neighbour’. The term neighbour, derived from the old English word *nēahgebūr* – the peasant (*gebūr*) who dwells near (*nēah*) – suggests social relations based on the spatial proximity of fixities such as households or estates. In Chinese, neighbour, or *linju* (邻居) also describes social relations defined by living in close quarters. ‘Lin’ (邻) indicates a basic community unit of five households (*wujia weilin* 五家为邻) according to *Shuowen*, (an early second-century Chinese dictionary from the Han Dynasty) that are adjacent to one another. The neighbour is often associated with friendliness and kindness, a sense of connectedness and shared responsibility. Neighbourly relations are thus often thought of as being equal, respectful, and mutually helpful. The Chinese proverb ‘a near neighbour is more helpful than distant kin’ (*yuānqīn bùrú jīnlín* 远亲不如近邻) describes precisely the kind of intimate relations between near neighbours. Much of the current IR scholarship and political analysis continues to evaluate China’s ‘Good Neighbour Diplomacy’ through this seemingly innocent notion (for example Zhu 2010).

However, neighbours and neighbouring are never innocent or simple. It may be easy to ‘love one’s neighbour when he’s distant’, just as

Jacques-Alain Miller (1994) describes, but it is a different matter in proximity. Uradyn Bulag's writing (Chapter 5, this volume) on Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour Diplomacy' offers some interesting insights on the politics of proximity, equality, and 'friendship' in neighbouring situations. Mongolia is a country endowed with world-class coal, copper and uranium deposits. It is also a country wedged between two mighty neighbours – China and Russia. Both neighbours have a strong interest in exercising influence and extracting natural resources from Mongolia. As a counter strategy, Mongolia chooses to seek support among potential 'third neighbours', particularly the United States of America (USA) and Japan. As a small state, Mongolia is willing to share its 'fortune sovereignty' – mainly its rich natural resources – with its neighbours both near and far as a means of balancing power positions and influence. For Mongolia, far 'neighbours' such as the USA and Japan, and now increasingly member countries of the European Union, may be much more lovable than close neighbours Russia and China. But it also borrows strength and support strategically from Russia and China in a moment of need. The case of Mongolia shows the kind of complicated and strategic relations between neighbours.

Indeed, there are neighbours who live in close proximity, and neighbours who are worlds apart. There are neighbours that are strong, and neighbours that are weak. There are neighbours who are cooperative and friendly, and neighbours who are disrespectful and obnoxious. The neighbour is always a familiar presence. But one never knows who the neighbour really is and what the neighbour might do in different times and situations. Just as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it: 'there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness beneath the "neighbour"' (Žižek 2005: 143). Veena Das (2007) in her writing about the 1984 massacre of Sikhs in India demonstrated that some neighbours are capable of turning into unexpected traitors and murderers. There is always a looming suspicion about neighbours, who they really are and what they can do, which challenges the popular imaginaries of neighbourly harmony and equality. The neighbour therefore is a complex figure that is both intimate and suspicious. This paradoxical characteristic about the neighbour renders neighbouring an inherently paradoxical and unstable experience, one that needs constant negotiation, reinforcement, commitment, and performance of innocence and good-will. The art of neighbouring thus entails collective sensibility and situated practicality where neighbours carefully manage their relations and negotiate shifting power positions.

## Neighbouring: Maintaining Closeness Near and Far

As the neighbour is a figure of ambivalence, neighbouring as an experience and a daily practice is also fraught with ambivalence and contradictions. By definition, neighbouring indicates close relations that are often determined by spatial fixities – dwellings, estates, and households; but these seemingly ‘fixed’ relations can be surprisingly elastic or fluid.

Today, when we talk about neighbouring relations between nation-states, a sense of closeness is often measured by how different bodies are brought together in immediate contact – often at border crossings, via bridges and roads, in special zones, dry ports, and marketplaces. These physical locations seem to suggest that interactions of neighbours are always confined by spatial fixities and, as a result, the patterns of such close-contact interactions are bounded and predictable.

However, we show in this book that neighbouring does not necessarily imply fixed engagement and predictable interaction. Authors of this book pay attention to movements and the fluidity of social situations. Neighbouring can take the form of periodical encounters, or it can emerge from an initially close contact that continues to be maintained across distance. Neighbouring may also take place far away from the national borders but still remain functionally linked to particular opportunities and risks presented by locations, just as Bulag’s chapter on Mongolia demonstrates (Chapter 5, this volume). Another case in point is the bazaar traders in Bishkek and Almaty described by Henryk Alff (Chapter 4, this volume). Alff shows how the closeness of neighbouring relations does not correlate with spatial fixities. After the opening of the borders between China and Central Asia in the 1990s, local shuttle trade was the predominant form of cross-border engagement. Later on, wholesale traders gradually took over and the zones of contact moved away from the immediate borders to the more distant bazaars of Bishkek and Almaty. Close relations with traders in China however remain active and meaningful. The rhetoric of trust is established in this particular situation to facilitate processes of ‘neighbouring at a distance’. It consolidates partnerships, maintains ties, and to a certain extent resolves disputes.

In one way or another, proximity, or ‘closeness’, remains a condition for neighbouring. However, this ‘closeness’ cannot be measured in kilometres or miles. It does not describe a static constellation but a relatively malleable condition; it indicates that one has entered a state of being with others and has to bear subsequent social and political implications. Neighbouring, in this sense, is diligent ‘border work’ (Reeves 2014) that stretches across



spaces near and far. Moreover, such closeness by no means implies equality or harmony. In fact, asymmetry and tension are far more characteristic for neighbouring than harmony and equality. The spectre of violence all too easily come to haunt even longstanding neighbours, as, for example, Lee Ann Fujii's exemplary study of the chaos and killing during the horrific genocide in Rwanda in the mid-1990s shows (Fujii 2009). Collective violence and profound sympathy are often bred together in closeness. In extreme conflicts, some neighbours commit mass violence against people they know intimately, as others become protectors.

Neighbouring is an inherently unstable and unpredictable social relation. Compared to kinship, for example, it is less firmly rooted in incontrovertible moralities. It is precisely for this reason, one could argue, that the rhetorical invocation of good neighbourliness so often employs the language of kinship. But firm invocations of a brotherly bond or other familial ties always risk to be seen as just that – rhetorical strategies that seek to hide the disharmony embedded in closeness inherent in neighbouring relations.

### Neighbouring: Contesting Intimacies

Neighbouring entails a particular form of intimacy, one that is neither radically antagonistic nor particularly harmonious under ordinary circumstances. On the one hand, neighbours continue to rely on closeness to seek common ground and mutual interest; on the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that neighbouring relations may one day turn into open enmity, when borders close, ambassadors are withdrawn, and people become refugees. There is constant subterranean tension that haunts neighbourly relations as anxiety and doubts co-exist with friendly gestures and vows of trust. Neighbouring describes relations that entail what Bhrigupati Singh (2011) calls 'agonistic intimacy', which can be both unsettling and productive.

Singh's concept brings together the notion of contest (*agon* in Greek) with the idea of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005). It helps make sense of situations in which conflict remains 'co-present with modes of relatedness' and shared aspirations (Singh 2011: 431). Such situations are very common in the borderworlds this book is concerned with. Despite xenophobic suspicions and envious gazes in Siberia, the lingering fears of disruption and instability in the margins of India, the continuing anxiety in northern Vietnam, or new asymmetries in the Himalayas, agonistic intimacies define what it means to live in each other's proximity.

Neighbourly agonism operates at both local and transnational scales, activating antagonism and inspiration at the same time. It threatens relations but also consolidates ties. This is what Bonnie Honig calls the ‘affirmative dimensions of contestation’ (Honig 1993: 15). When borderland communities compete for resources, rights, status and power, it is often the perpetuated contest itself that becomes the foundation of ‘neighbourly’ intimacy. The ‘in-betweenness’ of borderworlds, as Chris Vasantkumar calls it (chapter 7, this volume), fosters both ruthless capitalist competition and surprising solidarities at the same time.

Juxtaposing both imaginaries of harmony and what Žižek calls the ‘unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness’, we focus on the plurality of relations and actions in the contact zones between China and its neighbours (Pratt 1991). We turn our focus on what makes neighbours embrace shared dreams, voice similar doubts, and take similar precautions. We argue that it is not the ‘distinct features’ of neighbours at the margins – whether cultural, primordial, or a response to state oppression – that matter most, but the specific agonistic intensities rooted in the positionality of neighbouring relations and the skills to mediate and make use of them.

## Neighbouring: Negotiating Asymmetries

Another key characteristic of neighbouring relations is the innate power asymmetries between neighbours that are in need of constant balancing and negotiation. These acts of balancing and negotiation often become the foundational terms of engagement. Rather than equals, neighbours occupy different power positions and are in constant motion to challenge or overturn, maintain or take advantage of the inherent power imbalances.

The earlier patterns of neighbourly engagements between China and its neighbours were most famously theorized by the venerable historian John King Fairbank and his followers as a ‘tributary system’ (*chaogong tixi* 朝贡体系).<sup>1</sup> Simply put, the ‘tributary system’ is a meta-narrative that postulates a sinocentric view of neighbourly interaction among pre-modern polities: China, as the superior power and civilization, is placed in the centre; its neighbours are situated at various scales of peripherality. As subordinates, they pay tribute to the empire to show reverence and allegiance. In

1 Feng Zhang points out that the term ‘tributary system’ is a Western invention, which is translated back into Chinese as *chaogong tixi*. The terms *chao* and *gong* often appear separately in Chinese historical sources, but they did not form a ‘system’ as such; See Zhang (2009).

exchange, they are granted trade rights and protection, and are bestowed with gifts, investiture, and royal acknowledgement, through which, in turn, the emperor reinforces his authority and legitimacy as the benevolent, celestial ruler ordained (Fairbank 1968, Kang 2010).

Trade, in particular, was an important imperial technique in pacification and peacekeeping. Reserved as an exclusive entitlement to the tribute states that swore allegiance and loyalty to the central empire, trade became useful in ruling frontiers, consolidating allies, and maintaining the regional order (Frank 1998, Hamashita 2008, Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). Trade and tribute were deemed to be 'cognate aspects of a single system of foreign relations' – 'the moral value of tribute being the more important in the minds of the rulers of China, and the material value of trade in the minds of the barbarians' (Fairbank and Teng 1941: 140-141).

Fairbank's conceptualization of the tributary system in pre-modern Asia gained tremendous popularity and influence in the 1960s. As archetypal 'Chinese world order' and model for Chinese diplomacy it had a lasting effect on IR scholarship and the social sciences. However, its unabashed sinocentric views, essentializing frameworks, and simplistic understanding of the dynamic practices of trans-empire engagements also attracted considerable criticism (see e.g. Hamashita 2005, Hevia 1995, Rossabi 1983, Wang 1983, Wills 1988, 2001).

Fairbank and his followers portrayed pre-modern China as an 'empire without neighbours' (Fairbank and Twitchett 1980: 182), in the sense that China was surrounded by foreigners who were mostly 'barbarians' and who could only be dealt with by enforcing the strict terms of tributary interaction. Critical historical accounts, however, contradict this view and show that the modes of interaction between China and its neighbours varied drastically with ever changing motivations, ambitions, and interests (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006, Giersch 2006, Hevia 1995, Lary 2008, Perdue 2005, Rossabi 1983, Shin 2006).

During periods when pre-modern China was powerful and stable, formal tribute relations may have determined much of the asymmetrical but predictable terms of engagement between China and its surrounding polities. However, these terms did not necessarily mean that the 'smaller' neighbours were disadvantaged in interaction. The Mongols, for example, fully exploited their intermittent tributary relations with the Ming empire for not only gaining wealth and protection, but also for their own interests in defeating rival polities and expanding power on the steppe (Serruys 1967). The institutionalization of tribute relations neither elevated China's anxiety towards its neighbours' willingness to submit, nor did it ease the

hostility and suspicion that these neighbours felt towards China. (For contemporary examples of neighbourly anxieties under friendship diplomacies, see Chapters 1 and 9 in this book).

During periods when China was weakened by internal unrest, wars, and famine, neighbouring practices at the state level turned out to be extremely flexible and pragmatic. The political and military weakness of the Song dynasties, for example, was translated into a more realistic foreign policy when Chinese imperial officials treated neighbouring states as their equals (Rossabi 1983). In many circumstances when state-level interactions ceased to operate, unofficial connections persisted through trade and exchange (Hamashita 2005, Swope 2002).

In brief, the tributary system does explain certain patterns and politics, but as Feng Zhang nicely put it, 'much of the interesting interaction between China and its neighbours occurred outside of it' (Zhang 2009: 562). The scholarly works of Eric Tagliacozzo and Takeshi Hamashita, for example, clearly demonstrate that pirates and labourers had just as profound an effect on pre-modern Asian geopolitics as the state, and everyday interactions that took place at state peripheries played a pivotal role in shaping regional and global networks (Hamashita 2008, Tagliacozzo 2009, Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011).

Today, no one would describe China's interactions with its neighbours through the framework of tributary relations. What dominates the public discourse now is the so-called 'Good Neighbourly Diplomacy' and mutual development. But China's discourse of the 'peaceful rise' is still reminiscent of the past rhetoric of tributary interactions (Wills 2011). As a modern twist of 'ruling by virtue', China is believed to be exercising its regional influence through what Joseph Nye (2004) calls 'soft power'. Trade, and perhaps now 'development', continues to be a state technique that aims at 'benevolent governing' and the insurance of peace and order in the frontiers.

Inherent in this new phase of sinocentrism is still the old lens through which China's neighbours are viewed. No longer 'barbarians', they are now called or thought of as 'under-developed' nations, weak states, hill tribes, and minority nationalities. Today, the imperial image of barbarian tribes to be civilized or subdued may have given way to a more benign rhetoric of development and cultural preservation; however, the underlying dialectic of neighbouring relations between asymmetric powers continues to be relevant.

China's rise in recent decades has indeed reconfigured new asymmetries and modes of engagement in Asia; but we believe that the resulting realities can only be understood if we take into consideration local meanings and

situated encounters. Just as the model of the 'tributary system' in itself is incapable of explaining the complex dynamics of China-foreign interactions in the past, China's 'peaceful rise' and its exercise of 'soft power' falls short in exemplifying contemporary China-foreign relations. It cannot capture the multiplicities of relations and evolving politics between China and its neighbours. A more productive approach, we believe, is to look beyond analysis that originates from the powerful 'centre' and start focusing instead on the peripheries.

### **Neighbouring: Engaging the Margins**

To shift our focus to the peripheries, it is worthwhile to examine, first and foremost, how the peripheries are defined and mapped, by whom, and for whose interest this has been normalized and naturalized as if it represents social reality. Classification, masked as objective science and carried out with utmost authority by power centres, is a project that conditions and perpetuates power asymmetries.

A common feature of most of the peripheries of nation-states is the imposed and often arbitrary classification of their inhabitants as 'ethnic groups', 'hill tribes' or 'minority nationalities'. This classificatory enterprise, which already underpinned the political projects of Chinese, Russian, and British imperial expansion, was eagerly adopted by modern nation-states and continues to resonate with popular imaginaries of the 'remote' and 'tribal' both in the East and the West (see, for example, Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006, Harrell 1995, Lary 2008).

The enterprise of ethnic classification represents one dimension of neighbouring, namely between elites in mostly national centres of power claiming civilizational superiority and their archetypal Other in the periphery. Inherent in this enterprise is a particular conceptualization in which the remote becomes the location of the Other, whose 'strangeness' and imagined 'isolation' justify the dominant political structure of power.

One of the most radical attempts to shift attention away from centres and look instead at margins is James Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), which he describes as an 'anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia'. Following van Schendel (2002), Scott uses the term Zomia for the uncharted contact zones between the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Southwest China. Scott takes socio-linguistically diverse Zomia not as a conglomerate of primordial tribes, but as the result of flexible communities who consciously 'opted out' of state rule. Until the advent

of roads and airplanes, he argues, the mountainous areas along much of the present day borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) served as refuge for those who chose a lifestyle different from lowland civilizations. According to Scott, the 'tribes' in the mountains are thus a result of in-migration and ethnogenesis, an effect of oppressive taxes and *corvée* obligations in the valley states. Turning the idea of cultural determinism on its head, Scott frames the distinctive features of hill societies, including swidden agriculture, millenarian movements, a relatively egalitarian social structure, and oral instead of written histories, as deliberate mechanisms to 'escape' state authority. In Scott's model of Zomia, seeking refuge is the motive that characterizes relation-making between lowland centres and highland margins.

Scott's provocative and sharp reflections on upland agency are insightful and relevant for the project at hand. However, they explicitly deal only with the pre-World War II era and concern but a section of our terrain of inquiry. Moreover, we also find Scott's thesis neglecting a crucial dimension that is necessary to understand the dynamics in the borderworlds described in this book. While 'opting out' is certainly one motivation that brought (and continues to bring) people to the rugged peripheries, other equally strong motivations were and are the manifold opportunities found in borderworlds – be it in trade, natural resources or tourism (Giersch 2006, 2010, Kolås 2008). The motive of 'seeking fortune', for example, has been at least as important as the motive of 'seeking refuge'.

Fortune seeking, however, is tied to connectivity and exchange rather than to remoteness and isolation. In this context, 'not being governed' indicates a particular relational politics that is often rather a matter of skilfully mediating the presence of strong outside powers than openly escaping them. In other words, 'not being governed' while still engaging in active exchange relations often does imply a certain amount of being governed – at least nominally. What is at stake is rather a strategy of not being governed too much or too rigidly. As openly opting out of state powers became increasingly difficult after World War II, this mode of skilful neighbouring with the intention of being nominally but flexibly governed is arguably even more important today. This is how remote and 'underdeveloped' – even 'backward' – peripheries get tax deductions and flexible policies, how they build roads and power grids, how they establish special zones and economic belts, and become sites of eco-tourism and heritage preservation. 'Governing' is a notion too rigid to describe the malleable, contested, situational strategies that local societies use to mediate the presence of strong power. We propose that 'neighbouring' can better describe

how power asymmetries are managed at the local level. It indicates an interactive process, often with unpredictable results. Unlike 'governing', it does not assume superiority or hegemonic control. It simply describes the relational interaction of power players and how they engage with each other with their own agency, resourcefulness, and performativity.

The performance of loyalty and harmony combined with a strong emphasis on visual appearances are crucially important in neighbouring relations this respect, as several of the contributions in this volume suggest. Pál Nyíri (Chapter 2), for example, describes how the ceremonies, banners and even the uniforms of security guards in a privately owned Special Economic Zone at the border in northern Laos mimetically replicate the paraphernalia of the Chinese state. This form of posturing bears similarities to the Zomian strategies of appeasing lowland states that Scott describes (Scott 2009: 7-11). The difference is that establishing a Special Economic Zone requires close contact with state authorities. Today, posturing and rhetoric only work as long as there is legal endorsement and high-level official support. Essentially, the art of (not) being governed in the peripheries is about managing power asymmetries and organizing multiple relations at the margins. This is what we call the art of neighbouring.

## Neighbouring in the Post-Cold War World

The geography of contemporary social life, Willem van Schendel (2002) aptly remarks, has outgrown the contours of the postwar world map. New and possibly discontinuous 'regions', such as 'lattices, archipelagos, hollow rings, or patchworks' need to be visualized to overcome the 'contiguity fetish of prevailing regional schemes' (van Schendel 2002: 658). The borderworlds along China's edges – as the terrain of inquiry this book proposes – is reminiscent of such an archipelago or a hollow ring. The majority of processes and events analysed in the ten chapters of this book cut across the territorial boundaries of nation-states and the artificial lines that demarcate area studies disciplines. In this way, this volume seeks to transcend 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) and shed light on the 'geographies of ignorance' (van Schendel 2002) at the fringes of nation-states and disciplines.

This book does not ignore the relevance of national geographies; instead, it 'jumps scales' (ibid.) and assembles large regions across Southeast, South, Central, East and Far East Asia into a 'world area' that was and still is at the heart of state formation. Given the fact that mobile communities

existed before any modern states were formed (Ludden 2003), we consider neighbouring not as a geographically bounded experience, but as sets of overlapping relations that are subject to movement and change. Neighbouring, as we understand it, entails both a geographical reality of living in proximity, and a flexible construction of social relations that can be stretched across time, space, and distance. The stories of Tibetan returnees in Amdo, Tibet (Vasantkumar, Chapter 7 of this volume), for instance, show that borderworld interactions between mobile actors require a more widely drawn geography. Thus, the configuration of neighbouring relations in our inquiry has less to do with geographically bounded areas 'neighbouring each other'; it rather concerns a social topography of communities and connections as people migrate and stay. The peripheries portrayed in this book are worlds in motion, and the art of neighbouring is almost always tied to changing social relations as people and things move.

When we depict neighbouring as a shared experience and a common reality in the peripheries along China's edges, we mostly focus on the contemporary conditions of this experience in the context of post-Cold War geopolitics in Asia. Large parts of China's contemporary land borders are the result of imperial and colonial claims and treaties (Woodman 1969). The red lines drawn on modern maps often arbitrarily separated territories and peoples. Before World War II, such artificial borderlines were often cast as irrelevant and had little to do with everyday realities on the ground (Lary 2008). Frontiers and contact zones were under fuzzy sovereign rule and mostly beyond the administrative reach of central powers. Since the 1950s, however, this situation changed. The newly founded nation-states set out to militarize frontier zones with clearly demarcated borders. The fuzzy territories of erstwhile empires were turned into carefully guarded zones of national sovereignty. A series of border disputes and armed conflicts between China and its neighbouring nation-states ensued, most notably with India (1962), the Soviet Union (1969), and Vietnam (1979). These conflicts resulted in a period of curtailment and closure at China's edge. Longstanding ties and formal networks of exchange were severed considerably; in some cases, former neighbours turned into bitter enemies.

After the end of the Cold War, and especially since China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the political sensitivities of borders, while still lingering, were gradually superimposed by expectations of prosperity. In this context, drastic changes took place across the borderworlds. Sino-Vietnamese relations were normalized in 1992. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001. Border disputes between Russia and China were mostly resolved in 2004. The Nathula Pass



between Sikkim and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) reopened in 2006. Railways and road networks were expanded into territories that were formerly difficult to access. Casinos, mines and rubber plantations emerged. And new pipelines, dams and power grids were built to channel energy into these zones of development (Diana 2009, Garver 2006, Harris 2008, Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011, Nyíri and Breidenbach 2008, Zatssepine 2008).

A quarter of a century after 1989, notions of 'opening up' and multilateral collaboration have mostly replaced the ideological framework of containment – if not by choice then by public demand or perceived economic necessity. Stimulated by this momentum, frontier communities that were used to orient themselves toward Moscow, Delhi, Hanoi, or Kathmandu started looking toward China for new connections. Simultaneously, people within China directed their gaze to the border zones in search of emerging opportunities (Zhang 2011).

From tributary relations in the past to contemporary practices of (not) being governed, people, networks, and even institutions act upon multiple scales. China's rise in recent decades has produced new modes of engagement in Asia; however, the resulting realities can only be understood if we take into consideration local meanings and situated encounters.

When Veena Das wrote about the remaking of selves in the realm of the everyday, she showed that it is revealed not by grand gestures of transformation, but through a 'descent into the ordinary' (Das 2007: 7). Celebratory state policies and ambitious international frameworks aside, neighbouring is inherently such a descent into the ordinary and the everyday, at the interstices of multiple relations and dynamic actions. It is important to keep a critical distance from sino- or eurocentric views and the veiled sense of moral superiority embedded in both Chinese 'peaceful rise' discourse and Western 'development' rhetoric. What is at stake, instead, is to bring to light the multiplicities and complexities of relation-making in the borderworlds at China's edge. In this sense, this book aspires to offer parallax views and multilayered perspectives.

## Structure of the Book

The ten contributions in this volume are structured in three sections to illuminate three aspects of neighbouring described above. The first section explores the emergent borderworlds in the context of China's rise and opening-up. Examples from Siberia, the Himalayas and northern Laos show the gamut of 'neighbouring China' in a post-Cold War context. These

examples also shed light on the dialectics of centres and margins, as well as how neighbours forge relations through drastic social change.

Chapter 1 by Franck Billé, opens with an emblematic image of this neighbouring situation: the residents of the Siberian city of Blagoveshchensk gaze across the Amur River and see the bright and sparkling neon lights of Heihe, a border town in north-eastern China. Two decades ago, Heihe was a dark village at China's periphery; now it is a booming hub thanks to border trade. Heihe's neon lights, which allegedly run on cheap Russian electricity, render the ambivalence that Blagoveshchensk residents felt towards China visible. At Russia's edge, they feel neglected and far removed from the centre. And the transformation of Heihe seems to suggest a different possibility for a city at the nation's margin. For some of the Blagoveshchensk residents, the sparkling lights in Heihe symbolize the problems of neighbouring China; for others, they signal the ushering in of a new kind of modernity associated with China's economic confidence. The lights beckon a future where everything seems possible but, at the same time, also provide a reflection on current asymmetries. Billé explores both the friction between the twin cities and the ways in which they mimetically refer to each other.

The importance of visual appearances and mimicry in the art of neighbouring is also a topic in Pál Nyíri's account of two casino complexes in northern Laos. Both complexes were established as Special Economic Zones by Chinese entrepreneurs on leased land on the Lao side of the Lao-China border. Nyíri shows how the zones' management deploys 'simulacra of development' and the 'paraphernalia of the Chinese state' to position themselves favourably between Laos and the PRC. Although the zones are dependent on gambling and prostitution for revenue, their ambitions are couched in images of spearheading modernity. These images tie in with the development agendas of both states and, at once, keep them at arms length. While in one casino zone the strategy seems to work, in the other it fell out of favour with the Chinese authorities and witnessed a rapid decline.

A pervasive rhetoric of development also forms the backdrop against which recent changes in northwestern Nepal have to be understood. Martin Saxer describes in Chapter 3 how fervent Chinese road construction on the Tibetan Plateau in the name of the Great Western Development Scheme, and the extension of some of these roads across the border into Nepal, have spurred a drastic re-orientation of the Himalayan valleys toward Tibet and the PRC. With goods, and increasingly also food, being imported from China rather than flown into the mountains from Nepal's lowland centres, seasonal *entrepôts* near the border emerge as zones of engagement and intensive neighbouring. But despite the obvious boom (and the occasional

bust), the roads to China are not just the harbingers of modernity that put an end to the last enclaves of Himalayan tradition, as it is often purported. Rather than leading to modernity, Saxer argues, local communities see the roads as much as ways back to the long tradition of trans-Himalayan trade associated with memories of prosperity.

The three chapters in this first section provide snapshots that show the facets of the contemporary dynamics of neighbouring China along its borders. The contributions weave together several threads. In all three cases, spectacular asymmetries have recently resurfaced, leading to raising stakes in the art of neighbouring. Against the background of the omnipresent rhetoric of rapid development, fervent economic activity with a certain boom-and-bust quality has come to shape the borderworlds. Mimetic strategies and 'cosmological bluster' stand for the politics of appearances in this context.

The second section of the book looks into transnational neighbouring relations that are less directly tied to the spectacles of spatial proximity near an international borderline. Proximity, as argued above, is a matter of managing intimacy and physical as well as symbolic distance. Borderworlds as zones of engagement may reach beyond the immediate borderline. Based on the observation that neighbouring is not necessarily tied to a sedentary setting, neighbouring is practiced as a strategy of orientation and situated intimacy. It also entails the entanglements of fixities and mobilities. Neighbouring – enabled by 'jumping scales' (van Schendel 2002) – connects across regions and ties geopolitics to the very local and material. The chapters in this section provide three different perspectives on these aspects of neighbouring.

Henryk Alff (Chapter 4) discusses the dynamic reconfiguration of social relations in the context of trade between China and Central Asia. What started in the early 1990s with local shuttle traders has since reached an entirely different scale. The vast bazaar complexes of Bishkek and Almaty function as hubs for the import of Chinese goods and their distribution throughout the former Soviet Union. As transportation became more and more professionalized and wholesale businesses replaced shuttle traders, the zones of engagement moved away from the actual borderline to the back offices of the bigger players. Neighbouring relations are now managed over distance. However, the recently established Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan's anticipated entry, fundamentally change the situation again. Local shuttle trade between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for example, has regained a certain importance as it allows traders to circumvent the new customs rules for wholesale imports. Alff's

chapter shows the elasticity of neighbouring relations and the multiple scales on which it operates.

Uradyn Bulag's analysis (Chapter 5) of Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour' diplomacy adds another twist to neighbouring as a multi-scalar endeavour of negotiating distance and proximity. Endowed with world-class coal, copper and uranium deposits, in which both of its two mighty neighbours – China and Russia – have a strong interest, Mongolia chose to seek support among potential 'third neighbours', particularly the USA and Japan. To become a neighbour, Bulag argues, means to be oriented to someone's 'fortune sovereignty', thereby becoming a force to be reckoned with. As a small state, Mongolia is strategically employing 'smart power'; it is willing to share its 'fortune sovereignty' with its neighbours near and far as a means of managing proximity and distance. The ceremony of presenting precious gift horses to foreign dignitaries thereby plays an important symbolic role. However, not all neighbours seem to understand the symbolic ties between the fine horses (meant to roam freely in the vast steppes rather than being taken home) and the territorial logic of mining tenders.

Mobility and fixity are also the topic of Tina Harris' reflections (Chapter 6) on the mobile and the material. Neighbouring, Harris argues, is mediated through pathways and their disruptions. Harris examines the construction and use of borders and roads between China and India. She reexamines the meanings of tension that arise between those who set the borders and those who move the borders, those who map the paths and those who create alternative routes. Just as active neighbouring is a matter of managing distance, managing distance is a matter of dealing with mobilities and fixities.

The final section of the volume investigates neighbouring as social relations of 'agonistic intensities'. In Chapter 7, Chris Vasantkumar traces the stories of Tibetan refugees from Amdo in north-eastern Tibet who returned to China and started doing businesses. As new arrivals they were regarded as overly sinicized and outsiders in exile; back in Tibet they are watched with much scrutiny. Moving from one neighbouring situation to the next, they remain somehow always in-between. They are 'odd' in the sense that one cannot hold them concurrently in view with either 'proper exiles' (seeking refuge rather than fortune) or their Han Chinese neighbours in Gansu and Qinghai.

Leaving one contentious neighbouring situation behind for another is also what characterizes the cases of Burmese Muslims in China that Renaud Egretau presents (Chapter 8). Seeking both refuge and fortune across the border in Yunnan, which is considered a safer environment

than authoritarian and Buddhist-dominated Myanmar, Burmese Muslims establish new livelihoods in the jade industry of the bustling Yunnanese border towns. Here, they manage to make use of their social networks in Myanmar while at the same time find entry into the Hui Muslim society in Yunnan. In this sense, they move from being inessential neighbours in their Burmese homeland to being essential neighbours in the context of cross-border trade in precious stones. Agonistic interplays rather than open antagonism characterize the situation.

Agon – or contest – is also at the heart of Juan Zhang's analysis (Chapter 9) of the tensions during a high-level bilateral trade fair at the Sino-Vietnamese border. As the Vietnamese imposed extra duty on Chinese goods unexpectedly at the fair, Chinese traders at the border experienced the fragility of bilateral trade relations, and the uncertainty of cross-border interactions. Such tensions and the anxiety it triggers, Zhang argues, are always the undercurrent of neighbouring relations. Neighbouring in anxiety speaks to the agonistic intimacy that can be both unsettling and productive. Uncertainty triggers anxiety, and anxiety becomes the disavowed foundation of precarious trust and performative friendship between neighbours.

In Chapter 10 of the book, Magnus Fiskesjö steps away from an anthropocentric framing of neighbouring relations. Fiskesjö takes the notion of neighbouring to explore human-animal relations and deeply rooted sino-centric hierarchies. He argues that, in a certain sense, animal neighbours are seen as an extension of the barbarian periphery, a link in a hierarchical chain-of-being-like conception of the world. But this clearly antagonistic dispositive (the history of a thousand-year war, as Fiskesjö puts it) has become complicated by China's nascent animal rights movement, which emphasizes universal moralities in the fight against enslavement and the selfish extermination of human's animal neighbours.

The unifying themes in the four chapters in this final section are the spectres of unsettled relations and uncertain outcomes. Agonistic relations suggest that in order to achieve common interest, potential antagonisms between neighbours – are always held in check, and friendships have to be consciously maintained and performed. Agonistic intimacies at China's borderworlds reconfigure contemporary relation politics, as communities and politics move towards a future of promises and uncertainties.

While this book does not attempt to formulate a general theory of neighbouring, it is a first step in laying the ground for an anthropology of neighbouring. The focus of this book – the shared experiences of neighbouring along and across China's borders, proximity as a matter of orientation and intimacy, and agonistic intimacy that fosters fragile futures – helps

envision the possible contours of such an anthropology. Furthermore, we hope that the ten reflections of neighbouring situations in the borderworlds at China's edge render visible a geographical configuration of great geopolitical importance. The borderworlds at stake, which sporadically make headlines as spaces of disorder but usually remain buried under the 'neat graphics of national order', as Ludden puts it (2003: 1058), reveal their positionality only in comparison. We hope that this book as a whole will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics that transform both the very local scale of neighbouring as well as Asia as a whole.



**Section 1**  
**Borderworlds**





# 1 Bright Lights across the River

Competing Modernities at China's Edge

*Franck Billé\**

## Introduction

It is 9 p.m. and the entire city of Heihe on the other side of the Amur River lights up. All the high-rise riverbank buildings suddenly sparkle in a wide array of bright colours and a laser light dances across the sky. With pop music blasted across loudspeakers, the Chinese city has taken an air of festivity. Yet this is an ordinary day: two hours later the lights and the music will go off, only to return the next day at the same time.

On the opposite side, the sleepy Siberian city of Blagoveshchensk looks upon this quotidian spectacle with a certain level of ambivalence. 'It's just a show to attract Russian tourists'; 'it looks really beautiful from here'; 'they're powering these lights with Russian electricity they buy at discount prices, it makes me angry' were some of the various comments and responses my questions elicited. While the majority of respondents did not necessarily voice positive assessments, the importance of the light-show for the city of Blagoveshchensk was undeniable.

For some Blagoveshchensk residents, the show was nothing but a glitzy façade of modernity, barely concealing the poverty, dirt and uneducated rural population of the 'real' Heihe. For others, it was the trademark of a new frontier town, built with the purchasing power of their Russian neighbours, and symbol of a renewed, economically confident China. For most, however, the symbolic importance of night-time Heihe clearly reached beyond the image of economic success that the Chinese city was celebrating: Heihe's bright riverbank was also a reflective surface, a mirror reminding uneasy onlookers of their own failings. Indeed, while Heihe is booming and expanding ever more rapidly, Blagoveshchensk remains beset by multiple

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administrative and political hurdles, which together severely inhibit its growth.

China's meteoric rise over the last decade has catapulted the country centre stage, spawning a vast quantity of books and articles in a broad range of academic fields. Core foci in this literature have been the evolution of China's role in the region and issues of security and stability. China's rapid growth into a position of world power, against a backdrop of unresolved territorial disputes with several of its neighbours, have made borders a central concern (Chung 2004, Li 2008, Fravel 2008, Elleman et al. 2012). Indeed, despite China's insistence on its good-neighbourly intentions and commitment to a 'peaceful rise' (*heping jueqi* 和平崛起), anxieties about China-dominated futures endure (Billé 2008, 2015).

If China's active involvement in Asia and the profound changes in international relations this is likely to have for the region have been explored by numerous authors (Evans et al. 2000, Shambaugh 2005), comparatively less attention has been given to the social and cultural reverberations of China's rise on its immediate neighbours. Those in the national centres have been familiar with a particular imagination of China, but this is different in the frontiers where neighbouring is an everyday reality. Russian views in border cities such as Blagoveshchensk, for example, dramatically differ from Moscow's xenophobic narratives of 'Yellow Peril' and doomsday scenarios. Local views are not necessarily always positive, especially since China's rise has largely taken place at the expense of Russia's position in the region. Indeed, as China's only European neighbour, China's rise has been symbolically potent for Russia, and the sudden reversal of established cultural hierarchies where Russia had always enjoyed a dominant position has been a source of anxiety. Nonetheless, local views remain significantly more multifaceted and complex than those heard in the capital. They also frequently echo narratives heard elsewhere, notably in nations neighbouring China's western and south-eastern borders where the 'Chinese dream', particularly among the younger generations, is steadily gaining ground.

Historian David Ludden (2003: 1062) famously reminded us that all too often 'we imagine that mobility is border crossing, as though borders came first, and mobility, second'. The truth is more the other way around. Borders, he contends, are sociopolitical constructs that slice across ethnic and cultural continuums. While his point is well taken, at times the drawing of boundary lines has preceded the peopling of national peripheries, resulting in two groups on either side having little in common. The 2,500-mile border separating Chinese Manchuria from the Russian Far East is such a case.

If some indigenous groups such as Buryats or Evenki are found on both sides of the border, the vast majority of inhabitants, as I discuss below, are in fact Russians on one side and Chinese on the other. Similarly, frontier cities such as Blagoveshchensk, which were founded and developed when the other side was either unpopulated or insulated behind an iron curtain, have grown largely along national ideals and benchmarks, and differ, in fact, little from other towns in western Russia.

The novel situation in which the two sides suddenly found themselves after 1989 when the border opened is an apt illustration of the generative power of neighbouring. If, as numerous postsocialist examples have shown, renewed contact with a long lost neighbour does not necessarily lead to a smoothing out, let alone disappearance, of sociocultural differences, cross-border engagement can be genuinely transformative. The trajectory of Blagoveshchensk's and Heihe's urban development over the last two decades is a clear testament to this force.

The argument developed in this chapter is strongly indebted to the work of Anna Tsing, and particularly to her notion of 'friction' (2005). The reverberations of her analysis, whereby 'cultural diversity brings a creative friction to global connections' (Tsing 2005: ix-x), are especially potent here given that both Russia and China see their mutual border as a fault-line between two world cultures or 'civilizations'. As the ethnography of this chapter illustrates, friction can, through quotidian engagement, lead to an increasing enmeshing of lives, worldviews, and aspirations, as well as generate social and cultural transformations.

My argument is also inspired by Taussig's work on mimesis (1993) which productively fuses together the seemingly incompatible tension between, on the one hand, a readiness to adopt elements of the neighbour's culture and, on the other, a persistent emphasis on differentiation and uniqueness. Mimesis is thus not a matter of slavish reproduction (see Bosker 2013). What the urban evolution of Blagoveshchensk and Heihe represent is, in fact, what Kenzari (2011) refers to as 'mimetic rivalry', with each city borrowing inspiration from its neighbour but appropriating it in unique and original ways. Mimetic practices thus lead to cultural friction and exchange, and, perhaps more importantly, to commensurability. Indeed, to be recognized by the Other as different, one must ultimately be comparable, and therefore recognizable in intelligible ways.

## Background

Blagoveshchensk was established in 1858 at the location of the fort of Albazino, the first Russian settlement on the Amur River. Meaning ‘Annunciation’ in Russian, its foundation was symbolic. It not only marked Russian territorial advance eastwards but represented a beacon of progress and civilization in a continent perceived as feudal, despotic and stagnant.<sup>1</sup> Blagoveshchensk, just like the neighbouring towns of Khabarovsk and Vladivostok became in the space of a few decades a vibrant ‘center of economic life of the Russian Far East, matching the cities in European Russia in terms of size and architecture’ (Zatsepine 2011: 107). Comparisons with European cities were common and highly symbolic. Although at some point in Russia’s history some thinkers, notably the intellectual current known as the Slavophiles, had advocated embracing Russia’s own Asian cultural heritage and cultivate links with Asian societies (see Laruelle 2007), the dominant Russian worldview has consistently looked to the west for inspiration. The use of Asia as a terrain onto which political and cultural aspirations could be actively projected was in fact made explicit by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in the late 1880s: ‘In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, but in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans’ (Dostoyevsky 1993: 1374). Thus, even at the height of the Sino-Soviet friendship, the tacit cultural hierarchy was clear to both sides: China was the younger brother (*mladshii brat*), to be guided by a technologically and ideologically more advanced Russia towards a bright communist future.

An important port on the Amur River, Blagoveshchensk’s growth was fuelled in no small part by Chinese labour. By the end of the nineteenth century, the town had a sizeable Chinese population who worked as traders and manual labourers. In 1900, during the Boxer Rebellion (*Yihetuan yundong* 义和团运动), fearing that the 8,000 Chinese residents may form a ‘fifth column’, Blagoveshchensk’s authorities decided to deport the Chinese community in its entirety. They were driven out of the city at bayonet point and made to swim across the river. Those who were too old or too frail to comply were ruthlessly killed. Altogether, about 5,000 Chinese men, women and children died on that day (Dyatlov 2003, 2012, Qi 2009: 76-79, Zatsepine 2011).

A few years later Chinese migrant workers were again visible in Blagoveshchensk. But throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century Sino-Russian relations

1 Note also in this regard the meaning of Vladivostok as ‘Ruler of the East’.

remained strongly shaped by political events. The installation of a Communist regime in China in 1949 was followed by a period of intense cultural exchange and political and ideological collaboration between the two nations. However, this period was short-lived and relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union quickly deteriorated. Soviet attempts at moving away from the excesses of Stalin's policies were poorly received by Mao Zedong who considered this departure from communist orthodoxy a betrayal of shared political ideals.

The territorial disputes that had soured much of the modern period before 1949 once again took centre stage, spearheaded by Mao Zedong's famous statement in July 1964 that Tsarist Russia had stolen 580,000 square miles through 'unequal treaties' (*bupingdeng tiaoyue* 不平等条约) that Qing China had signed under duress. In 1969, border skirmishes on Damansky Island (in Chinese *Zhenbao dao* 珍宝岛) almost led to open warfare. These events resulted in the hermetic sealing of the Sino-Russian border. From then until 1989, the two sides became completely isolated from each other. The closure of the border signalled the reinforcement of a geopolitical fracture as well as a strong social interruption: numerous ethnic groups, such as the Buryat Mongols or the Evenki who traditionally straddled the border and nomadised across the international boundary line, suddenly found themselves cut off from their relatives on the other side.

The three decades between 1960 and 1989 are commonly referred to as the Sino-Soviet Split (*Zhong-Su jiaowu* 中苏交恶; *Sovetsko-kitaiskii raskol*). The period was characterized by pervasive suspicion on both sides and constant propaganda. Slogans such as 'You are living on the border, stay vigilant!' (*Zhivësh na granitse, bud' bditelen!*) and 'Border under lock (*Granitsa na zamke*)' were continually reiterated. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) Chinese counter-propaganda was also blasted across the Amur River. In recounting stories about this difficult period, my interlocutors in Blagoveshchensk mentioned that even innocuous behaviours such as looking at the other side of the river with binoculars could potentially lead to being questioned by the police.

## Becoming Neighbours Again

The opening of the border in 1989 signalled a change of pace in the relationship between Russia and China. Suddenly Russians were able to cross the border and engage socially and commercially with the Chinese on

the other side. This shift was especially meaningful for Blagoveshchensk, which, as a border town, had been subjected to very strong restrictions with regards to mobility. Not only had it been closed to Chinese visitors, Russians themselves, if they lived elsewhere, had only been able to enter the town with a special permit. Overnight, from a remote town on the edge of the national polity, Blagoveshchensk found itself at a crossroads between two widely divergent cultural realms, as well as at a unique juncture of commercial contact. Once again it became possible for people to renew ties with relatives on the other side, though many had irretrievably lost all traces or even memory of their foreign ancestry by then (Shishmanova 2011). One of my interlocutors, Andrei,<sup>2</sup> with ginger hair and typical European features, told me that his family had successfully concealed their Chinese heritage during the latter part of the Soviet period. For those mixed Russians who had phenotypically Asian features, alternative family stories were painstakingly (re)constructed. Many tried to pass for another Asian group, for Koreans for instance. Maria's family, ethnically very mixed, had to resort to such practices, especially because of her grandfather's high social position. The political atmosphere was such in those years that her grandfather even concealed his heritage from his own wife, who only found out after several years of marriage. On the Chinese side, individuals with mixed heritage were compelled to do the same, some carefully dyeing their hair black in order not to attract undue attention (Shishmanova 2011).

Thus, in many cases, by the time the border reopened and it was safe again to renew contact with the other side, all details about relatives had long been lost. For Andrei and Maria, China was as mysterious as it was for most of Blagoveshchensk inhabitants. In the late socialist period, study of the Chinese language had been actively discouraged and many faculties of Sinology, in both Russia and Mongolia, were closed down. With the border hermetically sealed, borderlanders on either side knew virtually nothing about their neighbours.

It was precisely this sense of unknown that drove so many Russians to cross the Amur River in the early 1990s to see for themselves what China was like. This 'ethnographic' interest was compounded with the sudden opportunity for Russians to purchase items that were not, or no longer, locally available. Andrei, who began his career as a *kirpich*, literally a 'brick', the local term for a person who buys large amounts of goods abroad and carries

2 All names are pseudonyms.

them back across the border,<sup>3</sup> explained that the first few years of the 1990s were characterized by a mad rush, with over 2,000 people a day pushing and shoving to get on boats in order to complete as many trips as possible.<sup>4</sup> 'It was really crazy. You didn't see many intellectuals (*intelligenty*) then'.

In the first few years of the 1990s Heihe was little more than an outgrown village. The only restaurants available were street stalls, and most commercial activities also took place by the roadside. As Andrei recalled:

You would see old ladies sewing Adidas trousers right there on the street. On one side they would have the material, on the other the trousers ready to wear. They sold these to Russian visitors who knew full well they were fake goods,<sup>5</sup> but they were very cheap. They were very bad quality though and wouldn't last long. At times the seams would fall apart even before you had reached the Russian shore.

For both sides, the sudden opening of the international border meant a propitious meeting of complementary desires. Over the last two decades this intense flurry of commercial activity has been a defining factor of dynamic development for the two towns. For Blagoveshchensk, whose financial support from the capital has long dried up, survival without neighbouring Heihe would be very precarious. The Chinese goods and produce available across the border have provided a real lifeline for the Russian town. In the case of Heihe, the existence of Blagoveshchensk has played an even more fundamental role and it has very rapidly grown into a town whose size and modernity have come to rival Blagoveshchensk's. In fact, the town has thrived precisely because of its location. The centre of Heihe is explicitly geared towards the Russian market: the vast majority of shops have signs in Cyrillic and most Chinese residents know at least some basic Russian. Heihe is a booming town, set to surpass its Russian counterpart in a few years in terms of number of residents.

3 In the late 1990s, traders realized that delegating the actual cross-border transport and having a team of *kirpichi* bringing goods from China would lead to higher returns. These former *kirpichi* are commonly known as 'lamps' (*fonari*). In other parts of the Russian Far East, notably in the Primorskii krai, *kirpichi* are referred to as 'camels' (*verbliudy*).

4 Initially there were no restrictions on weight. Rules have tightened considerably since then, with a maximum weight of 50 kilograms per day (as of November 2011) provided the traveler has spent at least three days outside Russia. For stays under three days the maximum allowance is 20 kilograms.

5 In the early 1990s fake Adidas trainers were sold in Blagoveshchensk as 'Abibas'. The name has stuck as shorthand for fake goods.



This newfound symbiotic partnership between the 'twin cities' is perceived by both parties as a guarantee for future success and development. To reinforce existing links, more and more international cultural events are being organized by the two localities, such as Sino-Russian art exhibitions, or an annual swimming competition across the river called 'Sino-Russian Heilongjiang Friendship' (*Zhong-E Youyi Heilongjiang* 中俄友谊黑龙江).

In practice, however, the two cities' (and indeed the two countries') dramatically different approaches to neighbouring emerge particularly clearly through urban practices and the use of space. The physical coming together of Russia and China at Blagoveshchensk is, to a large extent, an exceptional situation for Russia. Despite a 2,500 mile-long land border, the two countries hardly ever physically touch but remain 'insulated' by supplementary demarcation lines and restricted areas. Thus a 'border zone' (*dublirovanie pogranichnoi polosy*), a strip of land extending up to 18 miles inland on the Russian side, runs parallel to the international boundary (see Billé 2012). This border zone is restricted to both foreigners and Russians. 'As a result, the wildlife there is very rich' explains Alexandr, an economist at the Amur State University. 'One time I saw a bear there. I was on the Chinese side [where there are no restrictions], and I saw the Russian embankment, which only our border guards get to see'. At other points along the border there are also zones of fortification (*ukreplennye rayony*) which typically include obstructions and minefields.

This cautious outlook is also visible in the very layout of the city. Blagoveshchensk seems to be inward-looking, almost turned on itself. The main avenue, ulitsa Lenina, runs parallel to the Amur River, but at some distance from it. There are no large unobstructed vistas looking onto the other side. To a visitor, it feels in fact as if the river was largely irrelevant. Similarly, the few hotels that are situated near the river do not capitalize on their location, with the best rooms facing away rather than towards the river. This could not contrast more with Heihe's layout. There, the entire city faces Russia, with the tallest and most modern buildings, including the best hotel in the city, standing right on the river bank.

To an extent, differences in layout are understandable. Heihe is a new city that has grown and developed in response to cross-border trade with Russia. By contrast, Blagoveshchensk is much older and for the largest part of its history it had no neighbour to look at. Originally founded as a military outpost, architecturally the city retains a certain defensive quality, such as the lookout posts which, until recently, were still found all along the river bank, a legacy of the Sino-Soviet period. But this seems to be only part of the story. In the twenty years that elapsed since the border

opened, Blagoveshchensk's river bank remained completely undeveloped. Heihe's embankment on the other hand was turned into a pedestrianized promenade, lined with trees, small parks, and – in the summer – cafés and small restaurants. As was described at the beginning of this chapter, at night the whole area illuminates in a bewildering array of colours, and a laser beam dances in the sky, occasionally prodding the sleepy Russian shore on the other side. This marked imbalance in fact prompted a Chinese architect and friend of mine to remark on the contrast, describing it as a 'hot face pressed against a cold ass' (*yi zhang re lian tie zai leng pigu shang* 一张热脸贴在冷屁股上).

This stark difference is to an extent predicated on the commercial exchange taking place between the two cities, with Heihe's riverfront essentially functioning as a giant billboard seeking to attract customers. The city of Heihe is replete with Russian symbols, from statues of bears on the embankment to *matrioshka*-shaped trash cans, and the street signage includes Russian in addition to Chinese and English. Blagoveshchensk's residents tend to perceive the inclusion of these symbols as a means to attract them through the recreation of a familiar environment, but the strategy has been quite different. In recent years, Heihe has in fact styled itself as a window to Europe, with a whole section of Hailan Street lined with shops selling a wide range of goods, from Russian fur hats to European style paintings. By replicating Russian symbolism, the city of Heihe offers Chinese tourists a 'mini Russian experience'. Visitors can take short cruises along the Amur River, and on their return, shop for Russian goods in Heihe itself without having to physically cross the river – an experience which involves obtaining an international passport (*huzhao* 护照) and spending considerable sums of money.

In fact, this situation is not unique to Heihe, and several other Chinese border cities have followed a similar trajectory. Manzhouli, on the border with both Russia and Mongolia, has exploited its geographical position to attract Chinese tourists looking for a 'European experience'. Its buildings mimic European architecture and a number of somewhat surreal theme parks have also mushroomed close to the border gates (*guomen* 国门), like for instance a '*matrioshka park*' representing famous Russian and Western personalities and including seemingly random personalities such as Charlie Chaplin, Audrey Hepburn and Jesus.

This strategy is somewhat reminiscent of the process of 'mimetic condensation' described by Joseph Rykwert (2000: 150) whereby remote and sacred places were miniaturized for pilgrims who were unable to reach them. This move has enabled cities like Manzhouli and Heihe to benefit

from both Russian consumption and from domestic Chinese tourism and to develop rapidly as a result. The inclusion of Russian symbols in the form of statues, monuments and architecture is also intimately tied to the city's international ambitions. Like the city of Manzhouli, Heihe was among the 40 or so Chinese cities that announced, as early as the 1990s, their intention to become 'global cities' (*quanqiu chengshi* 全球城市) (Gu and Sun 1999).

By contrast Blagoveshchensk's central symbols reflect an unambiguous intent to draw a clear separation between itself and its neighbour. In addition to the numerous zones of separation described earlier that insulate Russia from China, the city of Blagoveshchensk, through its statues, monuments and memorials, is structurally insistent on defining itself as Russian rather than liminal. Thus the monument that dominates Ploschad' Pobedy (Victory Square), Blagoveshchensk's central square, is a monumental arch bearing the inscription 'The land of the Amur was, is and will be Russian (*Zemlya amurskaya byla, est' i budet russkoi*)'. The same inscription is also found on a monument on the edge of the city, erected by General Governor Korsakov in 1868, a large mural depicting the Amur River marking the border with China.

In addition to the emphasis placed on protection and clear demarcation, Russian attitudes also index a high degree of passivity. Changes on the Russian side in the post-socialist period have occurred primarily in response to particular stimuli rather than as proactive measures, and have frequently been cosmetic rather than truly transformative. In 2012, Russia unveiled a new iconic structure: the longest suspension bridge in the world, connecting the city of Vladivostok to Russky Island, home to a mere 5,000 people and host to the APEC Summit held in September 2012 (Nemstova 2012). By contrast, not a single bridge connects Blagoveshchensk to Heihe – nor indeed any border cities over the long Amur River – despite repeated Chinese offers to bear the entire cost of the project.

A crucial difference between the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk – as well as several others on the Sino-Russian border – is that Blagoveshchensk has suddenly, and unwittingly, found itself in the position of neighbouring. Originally an outpost of European presence in an uncharted East, the city did not need to actively engage with anyone. It merely acted as a beacon shining a light onto a dark and mostly empty space. Over the last two decades, as the small village of Heihe grew into a full-size town, Blagoveshchensk has seen its significance as model of modernity significantly weakened.

This notion of a beacon extends, of course, beyond the metaphoric. The significance of physical illuminations is in fact crucial given the importance

of electrification campaigns in the early socialist period and their significance with regard to modernity.<sup>6</sup> Electric light, through its powerful association with notions of higher understanding and culture, was seen as the metonymic emblem of a single grand narrative, that of modernity itself (Sneath 2009: 87). The common power outages and theft of copper and aluminum wires, which have occasionally plunged sections of Siberian cities into darkness since the early 1990s, are thus frequently seen as nothing less than the failure of this modernist grand narrative. As Oushakine (2009: 21) writes, people routinely complain of being left in the dark (*ostavili v temnote*) and of being cut off from the rest of the world (*otrezali ot mira*). In the context of Blagoveshchensk, the fact that it is the Chinese side that is now brightly illuminated is therefore symbolically potent as well as a destabilizing factor.

From a position of cultural isolation, and despite a structural reluctance to engage, the city of Blagoveshchensk now finds itself in a close, indeed symbiotic, relation with Heihe. In line with Anna Tsing's (2005) seminal work on global interconnections, I suggest that relations between these 'twin cities' are perhaps best understood through Tsing's fertile metaphor of friction. My use of friction in this context primarily denotes an affective force, not reducible to negative or positive outcomes, but potentially spanning both. Friction stands here as the generative energy produced through the physical and involuntary coming together of two different polities. As I will argue in the following sections, this friction is proving to be a truly transformative force. In the case of Blagoveshchensk in particular, the very presence of Heihe on the other side of the river has acted as a reflective surface, mirroring Russia's own dreams, aspirations, and limitations with regard to progress and modernity.

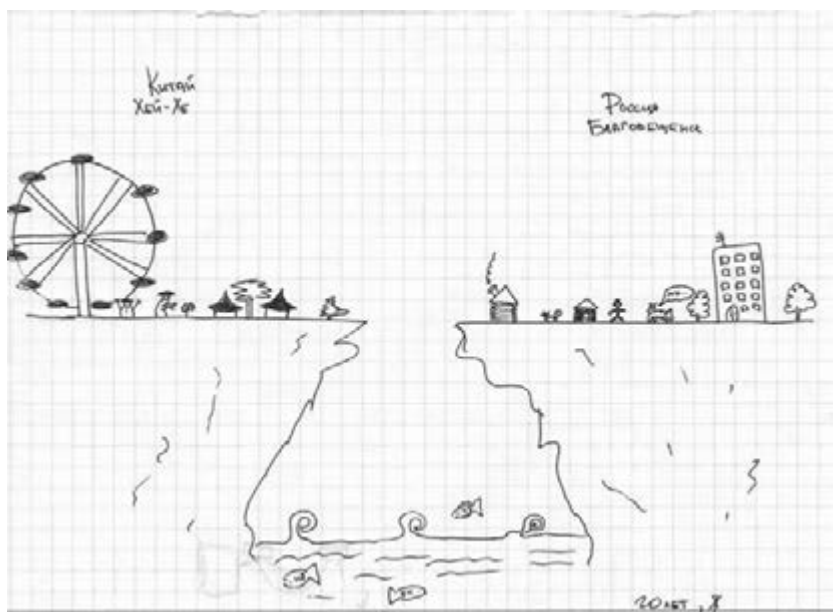
## Neighbouring Through Engagement

As the boat approaches the Russian bank, Sasha reminds me to set my watch back. The two cities may be right across from each other, and separated by a 500-meter stretch of water, they are nonetheless two time zones apart. This temporal rupture, adding to the bureaucratic hurdles and the endless queues for tickets, increases the sense of distance between the two cities.

6 Indeed, the first Soviet plan for national economic recovery and development – 'State Commission for Electrification of Russia' or GOELRO – was a major restructuring of the Soviet economy based on total electrification of the country.

Similarly, the immediately visible somatic differences in the population of these border cities make the two environments oddly bipolar: apart from Russians and Chinese, there is very little distinctive ethnic diversity.<sup>7</sup> This contributes to the peculiar sentiment that one is crossing from one world into another. The idea that the river marks a civilizational fault line is very much present in the minds of local people. The assumption of both Russians and Chinese that they are fundamentally different from each other is in fact shaping interactions between the two groups.<sup>8</sup> This notion of cultural chasm was a recurrent motif in interviews. It was also graphically conveyed in some of the drawings made by classes of students at the Amur State University, depicting the twinned cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk as separated by an abyss or even as distinct planets.

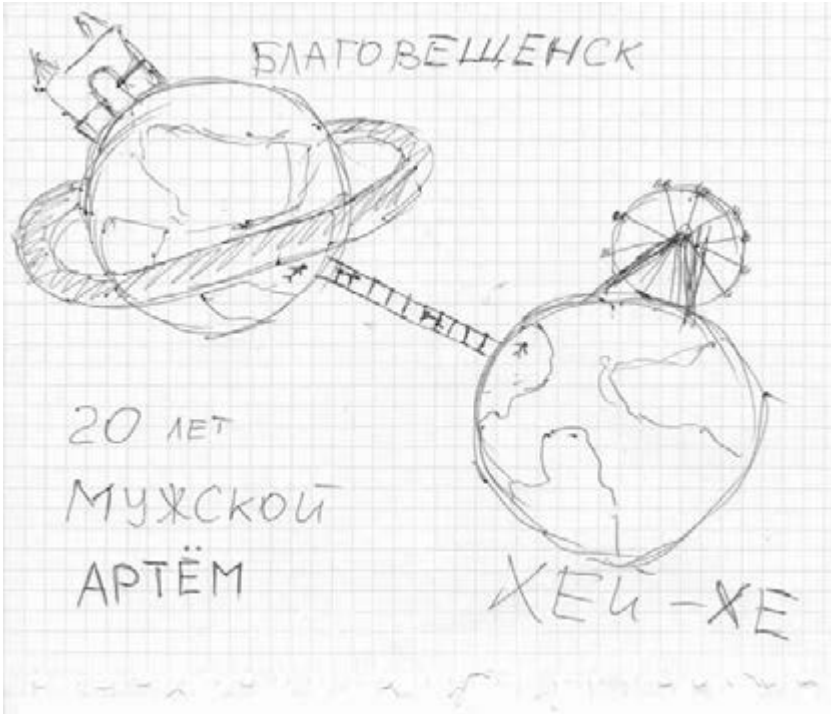
**Figure 1.1** Depiction of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk by a 20 year-old female student, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



7 In reality diversity is anything but absent. There are sizeable groups of Armenians and Azeris in Blagoveshchensk, and Heihe is home to a number of national minorities, such as Manchus and Tatars. However, this inner diversity tends to remain invisible to the other side.

8 Other Russian borders in Asia elicit similar discursive practices. The boundary with Japan, in the Kurile archipelago, is also touted by Japanese guidebooks as Japan's border with Europe (Morris-Suzuki 1999: 58).

**Figure 1.2** Depiction of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk by a 20 year-old male student, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



For Sasha, a Russian entrepreneur in his early 20s who relocated to Heihe a couple of years ago, the sense of unbridgeable difference has very much faded away. Initially attracted to China because it was unknown and mysterious to him, he has now fully acclimatized to living there. Having gained full fluency in Chinese, he has recently persuaded his retired mother to move in with him. But despite the lower cost of living on the Chinese side, very few Russians have followed his example. His decision to live on the other side of the river is frequently met with inquisitive looks and raised eyebrows.

Nonetheless, throughout my fieldwork, it clearly emerged that old stereotypes are slowly losing ground, particularly among the young generation who have spent more time in China. In the two decades since the border opened, residents of Blagoveshchensk have become increasingly accustomed to the cultural divide. In addition to the commercial interactions between the two cities, local Russians now spend the majority of their holidays in China: in Heihe for public holidays and short breaks, and further inland,

in Harbin, Beijing, Beidaihe or Sanya for longer holidays. For the younger generations, this has often meant that they have been spending time in China regularly from a very young age. This increased interaction has also led to greater interest in Chinese culture and traditions, such as martial arts and cuisine. Russian infatuation with Chinese food has in fact led to a veritable proliferation of Chinese restaurants in Blagoveshchensk, which are now three times as numerous as establishments serving Russian food. This transformation of the local dietary landscape has brought with it a slew of new practices, such as the widespread use of chopsticks and a taste for Chinese alcohol (*baijiu* 白酒).

In conversations with me, many interlocutors emphasized the sense of familiarity and closeness they associate with Heihe. 'It's not really China', I was told. 'Heihe is an area of Blagoveshchensk (*Heihe – eto rayon goroda*)'. 'It's a place where you go spend a weekend, have nice Chinese food, and have fun with your friends'. The liminality of Heihe was tied to a large extent to the fact one could navigate it without knowing a single word of Chinese, since most Chinese in Heihe know at least basic Russian. And although the city may differ in its cultural outlook, the frequency with which Russian visitors bump into friends and encounter familiar faces lends the experience a certain sense of familiarity.

Just as Heihe is seen as not quite Chinese, locals also perceive Blagoveshchensk as having a certain liminal quality. If my interlocutors never claimed that Blagoveshchensk was not (or even not wholly) Russian, they were keen to draw my attention to the existence of a Sino-Russian pidgin and to the many Chinese words that pepper local Russian speech. The most common example I was given was the verb *chifanit* (to eat, from *chifan* 吃饭) and its derivatives *pochifanem* ('let's go eat') and *chifan'ka* (restaurant), but other terms such as *fanzi* ('apartment', usually of poor-quality, from *fangzi* 房子), *laovaiskii* ('foreign', from *laowai* 老外) and *sesechki* ('thanks', combining *xiexie* 谢谢 with the diminutive suffix *-chki*) were also mentioned. Other expressions such as *mne mafanno* ('it's inconvenient to me', 'troublesome', from *mafan* 麻烦), *khaovarit'sya* ('fun' or 'to have fun', from *haowanr* 好玩儿) or *tinbudun* ('cannot understand' or 'someone a little dumb', from *tingbudong* 听不懂) are less commonly used but were known to some respondents.

What struck me as particularly fascinating in these discussions was perhaps not the existence of these terms but the persistent affirmation that a form of pidgin was in use between the two cities. This insistence concerning the emergence of a Sino-Russian pidgin has in fact been the subject of recent book-length studies by two Russian scholars (Oglezneva 2007, Perekhval'skaya 2008). While the classification of these linguistic

forms as 'pidgin' remains somewhat contentious, what these scholarly discussions do index is the embryonic emergence of local identities, divergent from national norms, and bridging the cultural and linguistic divide. The enthusiasm of respondents for the topic clearly extended beyond actual practices, as only a few interlocutors were able to cite more than two or three words.

The apparent desire of Blagoveshchensk residents to attenuate the linguistic gap that separates them from their neighbours is also seen in the increasing popularity of Chinese, which has become one of the most popular foreign languages in Blagoveshchensk, ranking a close second after English. Around 1,000 students study Chinese full-time, while another 1,500 study it as a minor subject in evening classes. A Confucius Institute (*Kongzi Xueyuan* 孔子学院) was also recently established in the city through which a further 250 students, including a class of retirees, are currently enrolled. In addition, the Institute is also providing free classes for government customs and administration, with the view to facilitating international contact and exchange.

In part, this growth reflects a stronger interest for Chinese language and culture, but for the majority it simply represents a key to future success. Thus an ever larger number of parents are registering their children in Chinese language classes or paying for private tuition in order to give them a competitive edge. Chinese is seen primarily as a useful tool to guarantee access to the international labour market as well as permanent outmigration. This keen interest in Chinese is therefore mostly strategic. In this regard it is noteworthy that the recent increase in the number of Chinese language classes is not taking place at the expense of English. Chinese is merely studied in addition to it.

Irrespective of individual motivations, linguistic and cultural engagement with China has led to better knowledge about the country and impacted significantly on Russian worldviews and geopolitical imaginations. A closer examination of attitudes of Blagoveshchensk's residents, particularly those of the younger generations, thus highlights the current coexistence of two competing geopolitical mental maps, one with Moscow as reference point, the other resolutely turned towards China. Preliminary interviews carried out with three classes of students at the Amur State University suggest that differences in world-views are to an extent tied to social background. Students who have had little or no personal experience of China are predominantly from families one might call 'socialist intelligentsia': their parents are educated professionals such as teachers and doctors, with a high social status during the socialist period but with



limited financial resources today. The fact that the vast majority of these students have been to Moscow and cities in western Russia suggests that their worldviews (or at least those of their parents) remain firmly anchored to Moscow and 'the West'. By contrast, for children of traders who have had extensive contact with China, Moscow appears to have lost much of its relevance as a cultural benchmark. Most of these students have not visited Moscow, and their responses overall underscored the sense of unbridgeable distance they felt separated them from the capital. For this group, the future was unquestionably found in 'the East', specifically in the cities of eastern and southern China such as Shanghai or Shenzhen.

The growing importance of China as cultural benchmark has been paralleled by a decrease in Moscow's capacity to shape ideas of the future and modernity. Particularly among Blagoveshchensk's economically more successful social strata, the megalopolises of southern China have largely eclipsed the lure previously emanating from Moscow and St Petersburg. While some segments of Russian society remain attached, culturally and geopolitically, to the models inculcated during the socialist period, it is likely that the current trend favouring China will continue to expand given that the old 'socialist intelligentsia' tends to be less financially successful. Chinese and Asian cultural models are also gaining ground among the younger generation through anime and martial arts, and it is also from China that fashion trends predominantly originate.

### **Mimetic Neighbouring**

The significant divergences in Heihe's and Blagoveshchensk's structural outlooks described earlier contribute to making these two cities diametrically different. But a closer look at their evolution and emergent architectural practices reveals a number of fascinating parallels. Indeed, if in its urban development Heihe appears to take the lead, the process is in reality far less one-sided. Heihe's urbanization model in fact closely follows Russian unspoken assumptions about what a city is supposed to look like. Thus throughout the course of its development, Heihe has replicated Blagoveshchensk's structural and urban features. A giant Ferris wheel, brightly illuminated at night and three times larger than the Russian one, was for example built in Heihe recently, and strategically erected right opposite Blagoveshchensk's main intersection.

Similarly, Heihe's urban landscape is dotted with statues, an established feature of Russian (and other European) cities, but a far less common

occurrence in Chinese cities. In addition to the Russian-themed features discussed above, a number of statues, sculptures and memorials are also found in the town, especially along the riverbank. In most cases the symbolism is readily understandable, such as the black dragon stele representing the Amur River (Black Dragon River or 黑龙江 in Chinese). Other times, like in the case of a very large statue of a woman holding a child, entitled simply 'Mother' (*muqin* 母亲), the meaning is less clear, though it may be another reference to Russian literature, specifically to Maxim Gorky's eponymous novel.<sup>9</sup> As the statue is not accompanied by text in Russian or Chinese, this is a reference unlikely to be picked up by visitors. Generally, these statues often appear not to be responding to an economic or affective need, but to be there simply for the sake of being there. Not because of a particular event to be commemorated, but because the presence of statues is inherent to what a modern and developed city should be like.

In the introduction of a volume focusing on emerging practices in Asian cities, Aihwa Ong (2011b: 4) notes that urban transformations involve 'unavoidable practices of inter-city comparison, referencing, or modelling'. Her argument builds upon Anderson's notion of 'spectre of comparison' (Anderson 1998: 2) which Ong defines as the 'distance to be travelled in order to catch up with the development benchmark and metropolitan ideals established by and in the West' (Ong 2011b: 14). While she points out that a number of Asian metropolises have in fact developed independently of an ultimate reference to the West, it is arguable that cities in 'twinning city' settings develop dialogically rather than with a single centralized model in mind. This point appears to be largely supported by the urbanization process witnessed in Heihe, where the focus is less on innovation than on one-upmanship with the construction of structures that are similar to those found in Blagoveshchensk, only newer, taller, bigger.

Of course, both cities also have a 'national frame of reference', and Blagoveshchensk and Heihe's development is largely modelled on trends seen in Moscow and Beijing respectively. But through direct competition, twin cities are also drawn together and tend to gradually come to take on similar features. Blagoveshchensk, despite its overall structural reluctance to engage, has thus adopted some of the urban trappings characteristic of China. For instance, the two Siberian tigers that flank the entrance doors of the main shopping mall, on 50 Let Oktyabrya Street, appear to be a localized version of the Chinese practice of placing lions by the entrance of significant

9 I am grateful to Adam Chau for pointing out this connection. Gorky's book is in fact a 'signature piece' of Russian literature for Chinese readers (Zhang, personal communication).

buildings. Similarly, the novel use of lights on the façade of buildings, or the blaring out of music in public spaces, lend the city a certain Asian flavour. In adopting such features, Blagoveshchensk is neither styling itself as an Asian city nor consciously emulating Heihe – all my Russian interlocutors were adamant about that. It is simply developing and modernizing itself using a repertoire of available markers of modernity.

Throughout the last two decades the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk have thus continually borrowed from a common pool of 'building blocks' to develop into modern cities, complete with statues, lights and the use of English. For a long time, the night-time lightshow example set by Heihe was resisted by Blagoveshchensk residents who declared finding the lights and laser beams garish and in poor taste. It seems however that these aesthetic assessments were mixed with considerable envy and with the realization that the Russian town did not have the financial wherewithal to compete with its Chinese neighbour. This suddenly changed after Vladimir Putin's official visit in summer 2011, when the Russian president urged Blagoveshchensk's residents to take their neighbour as model. This later led to the allocation of central funds for a complete redesign of the Russian riverbank. By October, excavation works had begun and trucks were dumping sand all along the banks of the Amur to create prime riverfront real estate. A little over a year later, the first section of the new embankment opened to the public, with a second section scheduled for early 2014 and the third and final section by the summer. This came as a pleasant surprise for the majority of Blagoveshchensk residents who were steadfastly convinced the project would never go ahead. The popular consensus deemed the new riverbank a resounding success, in fact 'much better than Heihe's'. Replete with historic monuments and military statues, the rather imposing embankment exudes ethnic pride and renewed confidence. Its very structure is strongly reminiscent of military fortifications and incorporates in fact the shape of the Soviet lookout towers in the outline of its outer vertical wall. In this sense, it differs starkly from Heihe's embankment, which is redolent with Russian symbolism and actively seeks to foster a sense of good-neighbourliness.

Other dramatic transformations in the course of the last few years have been the city's policies with regard to public illumination. Having long criticized Heihe's practice of night-time 'light shows', Blagoveshchensk now appears to be following suit. As the municipality's principal architect explained in a newspaper article, the city should elicit a festive mood (*prazdnichnoe nastroyenie*) when one walks around it at night. If ideally the local authorities would like all buildings to be lit, precedence will be

given to historically important buildings found on the principal thoroughfares. That these measures are Blagoveshchensk's 'tailored response to its Chinese counterpart (*svoeobrazny otvet kitaiskoi storone*)' is clear from the priority given to the riverbank: even before the central Lenin Street and 50 Let Oktyabrya Street, the very first place to be illuminated will be Krasnoflotskaya Street, a minor road running right along the embankment (Zrazhevskaya 2011).<sup>10</sup>

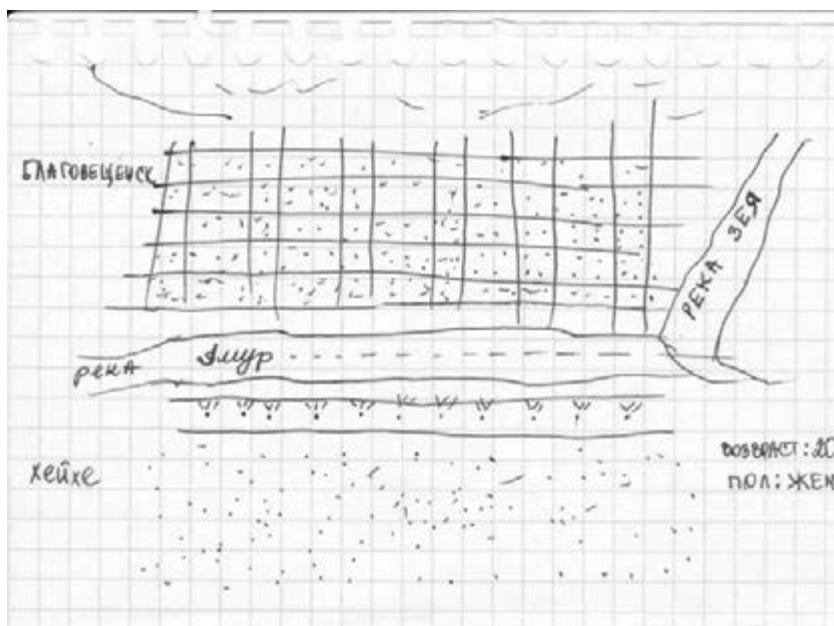
What this sudden evolution clearly signalled was the readiness of Blagoveshchensk to engage architecturally with Heihe, and to engage with it on *Chinese terms*. Traditionally, Siberian ideals of urban modernity had revolved primarily around the human struggle over nature, with smooth and straight roads figuring as crucial markers of this modernity. In their conversations with me, Blagoveshchensk residents routinely mentioned roads in their inter-city comparisons. Several proudly pointed out Blagoveshchensk's grid-like regularity,<sup>11</sup> and this aspect was in fact a feature that was frequently emphasized in the drawings as well. According to Maria, a political scientist working at the Amur State University, the Russian cultural preference for grid-like regularity as marker of progress and modernity is even stronger in a town like Blagoveshchensk which was a military outpost and retains this 'Roman fort' quality. 'We are still modernists here', she quipped. 'Blagoveshchensk hasn't reached post-modernism yet!'

In most interviews, respondents explicitly contrasted what they saw as the 'real' modernity of Blagoveshchensk with its wide, straight and tree-lined avenues, as opposed to the bright, shiny, but essentially 'fake' Chinese-style modernity. Heihe's riverfront development – the only surface of Heihe visible from the other side of the Amur – was consistently described to me as a Potemkin village, a visual trick performed by the Chinese. It was nothing but '*pyl' v glaza*', I was told, a show intended to attract Russian customers. My Russian interlocutors pointed out the discrepancy they saw between, on the one hand, the surface image of the city as a success story and emergent modernity and, on the other,

10 Evidently Blagoveshchensk seeks to avoid the occasional, but smarting, questions from visitors who, pointing at the bright lights of Heihe, ask the way to the city center.

11 However, people also commented on the high quality of the roads in China. Tanya, who lives in Heihe and works remotely with her main office in Blagoveshchensk, pointed out: 'Roads in Russia are very bad. Actually we have a saying – "There are two evils in Russia: idiots and roads" (*v Rossii dve bedy: duraki i dorogi*). Our roads are full of potholes and are often quite dangerous. When Putin came to visit, they resurfaced all the streets where his car was going to pass through. But only those!'

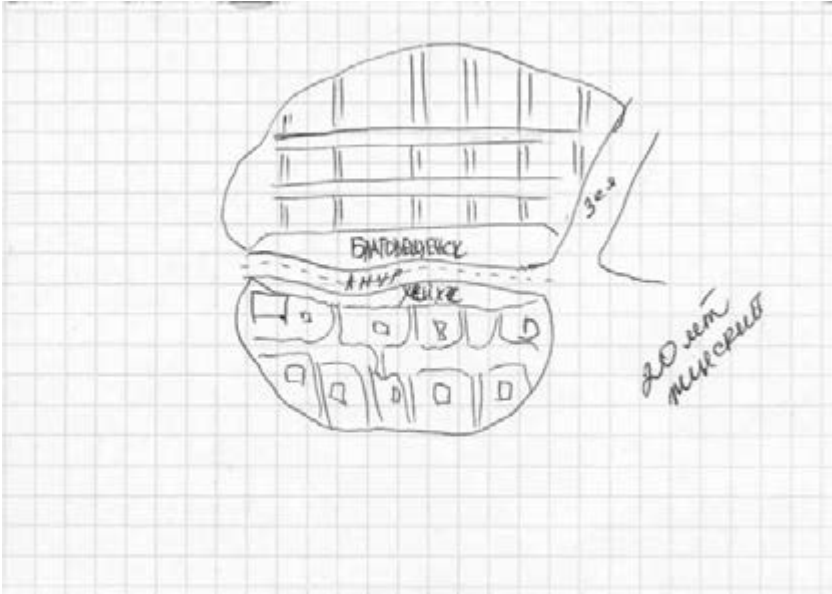
**Figure 1.3** Emphasis on the linear and grid-like quality of Blagoveshchensk in student drawings, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



the ‘real’ Heihe – poor, dangerous, and with a low level of ‘culture’. As a result of these discursive practices, Heihe’s modernity has consistently been described as a two-dimensional surface dedicated to exchange with Russian customers. In interviews, my interlocutors equated it essentially with a ‘bazaar city’, thereby rendering invisible other forms of urban development and commercial exchange in which Russians do not figure (Billé 2014).

Russian compression of Heihe into a singular surface also means that Blagoveshchensk has long dismissed Chinese realities as a mere illusion and has resisted engaging with its Chinese neighbour on an equal footing. A consequence of viewing Heihe as a surface is of course that the observer’s gaze, unable to pierce it, is reflected back, thereby turning the surface into a mirror. This reverberating process is graphically evident from one of the drawings made by one of the students. Unable to see beyond the riverside front, the focus of the gaze is turned upon Blagoveshchensk itself. As a result, and despite their avowed shallowness and artificiality, the bright lights of Heihe function as a reflective surface which returns to Russian onlookers the comparative lack of development of their own

**Figure 1.4** Emphasis on the linear and grid-like quality of Blagoveshchensk in student drawings, Amur State University, Blagoveshchensk, 2011



city.<sup>12</sup> Genuine or not, Heihe's surface has become one of the main sights of Blagoveshchensk. Indeed, night-time Heihe even features among some of the very small selection of postcards and souvenirs available in Blagoveshchensk.

The mimetic quality of the relationship between the two cities is greatly facilitated by a shared understanding of the nature of urbanism and modernity. As mentioned earlier, Heihe's evening lightshow gains potency precisely because of the significance of light and electricity in Russian culture. Similarly, other aspects characteristic of contemporary Chinese urbanism, such as monumentalism or iconicity (Ren 2011; Woodworth 2011), are also foundational to Russia's experience of urban modernity (Stites 1999). The reflective quality of Heihe's surface is thus closely intertwined with wider notions of projection, mimesis and alterity.

12 Projection is seen from the Chinese side insofar as Heihe's night lights – and in particular the laser beam mentioned earlier – also function as a torch illuminating the other side. No longer just a two-dimensional façade, the riverbank thus gains considerable depth as well as agency to act upon the other side. I am grateful to Marilyn Strathern for suggesting this active dimension of the Heihe riverfront surface.

As the anthropologist Michael Taussig (1993) has shown, cultures continually borrow from each other through a dual process of imitation – mimicry – and differentiation – alterity. This argument holds true for urban staging of modernity, where urban symbols become part of the overall grammar. As I illustrated earlier, this is particularly the case with cities in ‘twin city’ settings such as Blagoveshchensk and Heihe which are drawn into a continued dialogue. Surface inscriptions are particularly powerful here since they are the ones where identities tend to be marked and displayed (Anzieu 1995 [1985]).

Borrowing and imitation, as Simon Harrison has eloquently argued, are fundamental processes to the production of difference insofar as ‘people should differ from one another intelligibly’ (Harrison 2006: 44-47). As Richard Handler has shown in the context of Quebec, ‘Like a row of ethnic restaurants in any North American city ... nations and ethnic groups participate in a common market to produce differences that make them all the same’ (Handler 1988: 195). Thus Heihe’s installation of a larger Ferris wheel, its erection of taller buildings, and its display of brighter lights are all inscribed within a dual ‘process of mutual identification with each other as well as competitive differentiation from each other’ (Harrison 2006: 46). Similarly, Blagoveshchensk’s decisions to landscape and redesign its riverbank and to illuminate the buildings that line the Amur River constitute a sign of engagement, competition, as well as self-redefinition. One-upmanship is thus not simply a passive copying of the Other, but a more complex and inherently dialogical process whereby the ‘groups concerned are making claims to equality as well as to superiority’ (Harrison 2006: 46). This uneasy melding of mimesis and rivalry comes in fact close to Singh’s concept of ‘agonistic intimacy’, which he defines as ‘relatedness whose coordinates are not predisposed entirely toward either oppositional negation or communitarian affirmation’ (Singh 2011: 431).

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the last two decades since the Sino-Russian border opened, the two cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk have witnessed a dramatic transformation. From a small village, Heihe has mushroomed into a sizeable town which now rivals Blagoveshchensk in terms of density and urban modernity. If Blagoveshchensk appears to have remained mostly stagnant, the transformations the town has experienced have been no less radical. The opening of the border has led to the city’s loss of significance with regard to national

security. No longer a closed city guarding the border with an enemy state, Blagoveshchensk has become peripheral and remote from the point of view of the capital.<sup>13</sup>

While its ties to Moscow and western Russia have weakened, the Russian town has, by contrast, grown very close to its Chinese neighbour. Economically dependent on each other for their survival, the two cities are commonly described as in symbiosis with one another. Visually they also mirror each other. In a process of mimetic condensation, Heihe has taken on Russian symbols and reinvented itself as a Russian theme park. For the Russians on the other side of the Amur River, the very surface of Heihe acts as a mirror reflecting the aspirations and failings of their own city.

This mirroring process recalls Žižek's discussion of the dual nature of the neighbour, who stands as both the same and Other: 'beneath the neighbour as my semblant, my mirror image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be gentrified' (Žižek 2005: 143). The mirror image that informs the relationship between Heihe and Blagoveshchensk is similarly a dual one. The ties that bind the two cities may be close, but they have not attenuated the sense that the river marks some kind of civilizational fault-line. More than two decades after the border reopened and relations normalized between the two sides, the idea endures that Europe and Asia are two different and incompatible civilizations (Fond Obshchestvennoye Mnenie 2007, Ponkratova et al. 2009). But at the same time, the sentiment that Heihe is not quite Chinese, not quite Other, was made explicit in interviews. Food in Heihe was consistently described as 'too Russified', not Chinese enough. Heihe's Chinese residents similarly tend to be seen as having changed through their contact with Russians and to have become different from other Chinese. The picture of Heihe that emerged in discussions with my interlocutors was thus one that was both the absolute Other in the Žižekian sense *and* a part of oneself (an area of Blagoveshchensk itself, a '*rayon goroda*'). Relations to the national capital were similarly fractured: Moscow was both the ultimate cultural reference point *and* the absolute remote.

It is precisely in this heterogeneity of views that the destabilization of cultural values (and the unseating of Blagoveshchensk as outpost and

13 The sense of remoteness increasingly associated with Moscow is both physical and symbolic. Travel from Blagoveshchensk to Moscow has become extremely expensive – to the extent that it is now cheaper to travel via Harbin and Beijing. On visits to Moscow, Blagoveshchensk residents are also surprised to discover that in the capital no-one seems to know where Blagoveshchensk is. Whereas Blagoveshchensk was a strategically and symbolically important city during the Soviet era, it has become a non-place (cf. Augé 1992, Brown 2003).



cultural beacon) gains palpability. The conflicting views expressed by my interlocutors should not necessarily be interpreted as symptomatic of a deep social fracture, with Blagoveshchensk society neatly divided into two moieties. The idea that these positions represent the extremities of a wide spectrum – ranging from very negative ideas of China predicated on demographic imbalance and alleged irredentist ambitions to extremely enthusiastic attitudes about China and Chinese culture – is also somewhat misleading. In fact, much ambivalence was present within individuals. Thus even the most staunchly pro-Chinese interviewees, such as students who spoke fluent Chinese and dreamed of moving to China to live and work, occasionally juxtaposed both positive and negative assessments.

As I have shown in this text, the friction generated by close contact between two neighbours has not necessarily always been a positive one, as the example of the Blagoveshchensk massacre in 1900 makes clear. However, as affective energy, neighbouring is ultimately transformative. It can, though not always, attenuate the sense of social and cultural distance between two polities, but more importantly the ‘art of neighbouring’ compels both parties to engage with each other in ways that are comparable and commensurable.

While the drawing of national borders has, in most countries, tended to slice through ethnic and cultural continuums, the 2,500 mile border separating Chinese Manchuria from the Russian Far East is somewhat unusual. While some groups autochthonous to the region do straddle the international boundary line, the vast majority of inhabitants are Russians on one side and Chinese on the other. The two groups moved to the region in fact long after the border was fixed, many of them through national relocation programs (Breyfogle et al. 2007) and for several decades were not allowed to interact. Throughout that period, these Russian and Chinese borderlanders did not reside at a site of exchange but, on the contrary, at a remote location, on the very edge of their respective polity. The dialogical and mimetic rapport established between the two border cities of Heihe and Blagoveshchensk in the last two decades has therefore, through sheer proximity, brought the two populations together. Unable to sustain the fiction of cultural separateness (see Tsing 2005: ix-x), the two cities have been compelled to (re)conceptualize themselves as one constituent in a symbiotic pair rather than separate entities. Thus, through the formation of countless commercial, cultural, social and linguistic ties, the energy generated through this neighbouring ‘friction’ has encouraged both cities to develop in increasingly commensurable ways, in spite of the structural differences that continue to visually set them apart.

## 2 Realms of Free Trade, Enclaves of Order

Chinese-Built 'Instant Cities' in Northern Laos

*Pál Nyíri\**

In its heyday, the hallmark of British imperialism was a mix of free-trade mercantilism and the imposition of modern government that involved counting, measuring, delimiting, and disciplining. Today, China's engagements with poor countries are frequently called neocolonial or neo-imperial and alternately accused of engaging in robber-baron capitalism and of subverting the free market through state-backed loans and murky patronage networks. But, just as the ideology of free trade did not prevent the British government from enforcing an opium monopoly in India and using it to improve its foreign-trade balance, so too large-scale Chinese projects abroad combine the involvement of policy banks and state enterprises with the championing of free trade.

To its authoritarian southwestern neighbours, Laos and Burma in particular, China is the source of both free trade and developmental-state ideology. The most ardent champions of both are often private businessmen rather than government officials. This chapter will discuss how Chinese investors in two special economic zones in northern Laos, whose economy has been based on gambling, prostitution, and drugs, have deployed both ideologies and created simulacra of development while fending off both the Lao and the Chinese state. While the fantasy landscapes and 'vice economies' of these special zones seem like an extreme case, the proliferation of state- and private-led Chinese-invested special economic zones and other concessions around the world arguably rests on the same duality.

### The Special Zones of Northern Laos

In 2007, the Lao government granted Fokhing, a Hong Kong-registered company, a 16 square kilometres land concession across the main border

\* Parts of this article are based on Nyíri (2012a). The author wishes to thank the participants of the 2012 Berkeley Summer Research Institute on 'Bordering China' for their comments.

crossing with China, at Boten in Luang Namtha Province. The concession, called Golden Boten City, was for 30 years, with the option of renewing the lease twice. In the next five years, the area underwent an economic boom centred on a large casino that mostly attracted gamblers from mainland China. Business opportunities drew thousands of shop- and stall-keepers, prostitutes, and other workers from China, numbering an estimated 4,800 in the peak season of 2010. Hotels with a total capacity of 2,700 rooms, condo-style apartment buildings, and workers' dormitories were built on the site of the former village of Boten. Management estimated that US\$130 million had been invested by mid-2010. According to a report written for the visit of the chairman of the Lao National Assembly in November 2010, this included the construction of the school, as well as preparing the ground for the houses of relocated villagers and a relocated iodization plant.

The zone ran on Chinese currency and Beijing time, and until December 2010, it relied on Chinese providers for both the fixed and mobile phone and Internet networks. Members of a 700 strong security force-marched around in uniforms resembling those of Chinese police, emblazoned with 'Special Zone Security' in Chinese characters. According to a report written at the end of 2010, the zone had 300 Lao employees, but they were visible only in low-skilled jobs (maids, bell boys). Wages were higher than both Laos and China's adjacent areas: in 2011, cleaning jobs were being advertised for 1,800 yuan (US\$300) a month plus room and board.

From the outset, the management of the company styled Golden Boten City a special zone (*tequ* 特区), but it was only in 2010 that the Lao government officially gazetted it as such, based on a new government decree on special economic zones. Under the decree, the zone is governed by an Economic Committee (EC) and an Administrative Committee (AC). The former's members are appointed by the investors. The first chairman of the EC was Fokhing's owner, Huang Mingxuan, a Hong Kong resident originally from southern Fujian Province who used to operate a gambling hall in Mong La, just across the China-Burma border, controlled by a splinter group of the former Burmese Communist Party and known for its amphetamine production (Nyíri 2012a). Members of the AC are appointed by the Lao prime minister's office but paid by the investing company. While the AC exercises an overall supervisory function, the EC is in charge not only of the economy but also of 'cultural, social, education and public health development' as well as 'security and order' and land allocation (Article 94 of the decree). In return for a yearly concession fee paid to the government, the EC has the right to levy its own taxes and administrative fees and enact legislation and issue license plates and ID cards that are different from

**Figure 2.1** Condos at Golden Boten City. Danielle Tan, 2012



those in the rest of Laos but are valid across the country. Initially, Chinese visitors did not even need to go through Lao immigration to visit the zone, and they still do not have to clear Lao customs because the zone is located between the immigration checkpoint and the new customs house, built by the zone itself.

By 2010, the buildings, the like of which had never been seen in northern Laos, the organization of space, the urban-like bustle, Chinese-English bilingual street signs, the second-hand Chinese police van, the uniforms of the security guards, the currency, banners with political slogans in Chinese characters, the Chinese channels to which hotel room televisions were tuned, and the shimmering neon signs of the entertainment venues created a sense of being in China, which was frequently voiced both by Western journalists who wrote about the place and by Lao workers.<sup>1</sup> This sense was produced by the radical rupture of the visual, spatial, and social organization of the place compared to the surrounding Lao countryside marked by sparse wooden huts, lush nature, and dark nights. It was also strengthened and coloured by the presence of visual cues (uniforms, official-looking signs, banners) associated specifically with the strong Chinese state, the equivalents of which are far less ubiquitous even in urban Laos.

Yet in the same year, following reports in Chinese media that security staff had detained and tortured Chinese gamblers, the Chinese foreign ministry issued a statement warning Chinese nationals against going to Laos to gamble. Chinese border guards began turning back Chinese citizens who had not obtained visas in advance. Chinese telephone companies operating in Boten were ordered to cut their services. Chinese police issued arrest warrants for some fifty gambling hall operators and employees wanted on charges of inducement to gamble and facilitating illegal border crossing. By April 2011, all gambling halls – operated by twelve different companies, following the Macau model<sup>2</sup> – had closed down, small traders had left in droves, and the zone was deserted. The zone's management now appealed to the Lao government, with whose senior members it had cultivated cordial relations, for support, offering financing for the Lao section of a planned Yunnan-Singapore railway.

Despite the demise of Golden Boten City, the special zone lives on. In March 2012, a company from China, rumoured to be connected to a high official in Xishuangbanna, the Chinese prefecture across the border, purchased the zone's assets from Fokhing, and announced plans to build a logistics hub. By July, earth-moving machinery was seen at work in the zone.<sup>3</sup>

1 I visited Golden Boten City three times and the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone twice between 2008 and 2011.

2 In Macau, such companies are known as 'junket operators'. They play a crucial role in organizing gambling by visitors from mainland China because of currency controls and the fact that gambling debts are not legally enforceable. The junket operators provide loans and enforce debts by extralegal means.

3 Danielle Tan, personal communication, September 26, 2012.

In the meantime, Golden Boten, deserted though it is, remains a monument to the Chinese version of urban modernity that no other place in Laos matches. It is not without basis that the English-language *Luang Namtha Provincial Tourism Magazine* describes Boten as the ‘most internationally modernized city in [L]ao’.

Like Boten, the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Bokeo province, across the Mekong from Thailand, was granted as a concession to the Hong Kong-registered KingsRomans Group in 2007 and gazetted in 2010. Unlike Boten, however, this zone is not on the Kunming-Bangkok highway but on farmland 50 kilometres to the north of it. Various figures have been circulating about the size and duration of the concession; the company’s own documents mention 103 square kilometres and 99 years. Like his counterpart in Boten, the chairman of KingsRomans and the zone’s EC, Zhao Wei, was born in mainland China and used to operate a gambling hall in Mong La; he now is a Macau resident.

**Figure 2.2** The Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone seen from the Thai side of the Mekong



Danielle Tan, 2012

The Golden Triangle zone's main feature, too, is gambling. So far, two casinos, five hotels, a nightclub, two shopping arcades, several markets, and a large number of dormitories and single-story houses for families have been completed. According to Zhao, KingsRomans had invested more than US\$500 million in the zone by late 2010 and had 1,500 employees. Much of the investment has been in basic infrastructure: roads, reinforcements of the riverbank, a water-bottling plant, houses for farming households to be resettled within the zone. The company has also planted crops and introduced pig, cattle, and poultry farming, and there are plans to develop 'organic sightseeing farming' with the help of specialists from China. Two-thirds of the area consists of hills, which will be left undeveloped as a nature reserve where swidden – traditionally practiced by mountain dwellers in the area – will be forbidden. While many Chinese invest in rubber and other plantations in northern Laos, Zhao Wei has prohibited rubber planting in the zone, as he plans to develop it as a base for regional tourism. In 2011, estimates of the zone's migrant population varied between six and ten thousand; this excludes some 5,000 Lao peasants who inhabit seven villages in the zone.

Telephone network coverage is offered by Thai and Chinese companies. Electricity comes from Thailand, but sockets are Chinese. Like Boten, the zone uses Beijing time. The statutes governing the zone's legal status seem to be the same as in Boten, but Golden Triangle's managers have made more of the zone's autonomy, which covers 'everything except defence, foreign relations and legislation' (Hanzi 2010, 13). Zhao Wei, referred to as Chairman Zhao, makes public appearances akin to those made by Chinese officials; zone managers are referred to as 'cadres'. Here, too, there are anti-drug posters and banners in Chinese.

The Safety Office comprises about 100 Lao policemen and a detachment of Chinese and Burmese security guards. Lao police can be seen patrolling the rural parts of the zone in brand-new cars – presumably bought by the zone administration – but not around the casinos, suggesting an informal division of jurisdiction. According to a news report, one of Zhao's assistants is a former rural government official from China, while another is a former diplomat who served at the Chinese embassy in Vientiane (Fawthrop 2011). On the Lao side, the chairman of the AC is a Lao police official with a degree from Vietnam, while the vice-chairman is a member of the Lao National Assembly. Street signs, like official documents, are trilingual (Lao, English and Chinese), but West Garden Road, the main riverside avenue, is lined with weather-beaten Lao national and Party flags, perhaps a leftover from a high-ranking official's visit.

The work force is more multinational than in Boten. In line with the more upmarket décor of the casinos, modelled clearly on Macau, there is said to be a Portuguese and a Malaysian in the company's management. While shop- and stall-keepers, prostitutes, and other petty entrepreneurs tend to be from Sichuan, Fujian, Hunan, and north-eastern China, construction workers are mostly Burmese (even some Lao farms within the zone reportedly employ Burmese farm hands), while company, casino and hotel staff are a mix of Chinese, Thai, and Burmese. The zone also has a Lao farming population. Ethnic Chinese from northern Thailand and Burma often work in positions of some trust, for example as drivers or bodyguards. Wages are similar to Boten, but there is an ethnic hierarchy: Burmese construction workers' monthly wages start at US\$120-US\$150; those of KingsRomans' Lao employees at US\$150-US\$200; and Chinese workers get a 400 yuan (US\$67) supplement for 'working abroad'.

### Simulacra of Development

The developers of Golden Boten and the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zones (SEZ) are attempting to establish themselves as regional modernizers at an opportune moment. In the last decade or so, northern Laos – one of the poorest and most remote areas of Southeast Asia – has been undergoing a profound transformation as it became the site of one of the major transport arteries of the Greater Mekong Subregion, a project of economic integration supported by the Asian Development Bank (Glassman 2012). This has facilitated the entry of Chinese investors attracted by cheap labour and available land to grow cash crops such as rubber and cassava, for which demand in China is high. Some of the new plantations take advantage of the Chinese government's opium substitution subsidies. It also generates tropical hardwood as an extremely valuable initial by-product of plantation agriculture (Diana 2009, Dwyer 2013, Shi 2008). Chinese truckers and traders followed (Tan 2010), and the mountainous region, inhabited largely by ethnic minorities disenfranchised by the Lao state, has been catapulted from a largely self-sufficient and in part slash-and-burn agriculture into the global cash economy (Lyttleton *et al.* 2004). The relative wealth of farmers engaging in rubber planting across the Chinese border, now visible to Lao neighbours who often belong to the same ethnic groups, have had as profound an effect on aspirations of modernity as the Chinese-built roads and the motorbikes sold by Chinese shopkeepers in northern Lao towns have had on the speed of transportation (Diana 2009, Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011).



In 2008, a master plan for the economic development of northern Laos, prepared by Chinese specialists on behalf of the Yunnan Province Reform and Development Commission and presented to the Lao government, proposed setting up new free trade zones along the country's borders and developing tourism concessions, operated and controlled by contractors. This proposal seems to be reflected in Laos' 2009 Law on Investment Promotion, which enables the establishment of Special Economic Zones, defined as 'a development zone for urbanization' that may consist of industrial, touristic, free trade, residential and other kinds of zones (Article 33). This vision is further elaborated in Decree No. 443/PM, issued in October 2010, which sets out the criteria for transforming a special zone into a city (Article 33): it must have a population of at least 80 thousand and infrastructure that includes schools, hospitals, and preferably an international airport.

Such fantastic visions are probably both inspired by developers' promotional texts and fuel more promises by them. These texts and especially the visuals that accompany them, like those made for other special zones the world over, situate them in an explicitly global landscape marked by concentric circles of distance from world capitals. The first brochure Golden Boten City produced for investors envisioned 'thousands of people ... with various occupations and identities, to form a huge community, and a modern society'.<sup>4</sup> A report on Phoenix TV, a popular Hong Kong-based Chinese satellite channel, compared Boten to Shenzhen, China's first, legendary special zone, which grew from a fishing village to one of southern China's largest cities (Phoenix TV 2010). The rows of Boten's condo-like buildings replicates the 'instant cities' constructed by Chinese companies that, in the last few years, have spread from the outskirts of Kampala and Luanda to the Michigan rust belt: some of these are related to government commissions and intended for the local middle class, while others combine retail and exhibition spaces with residential and recreational ones marketed to relatively high-income buyers in China.

My first encounter with the instant city motive was in Southeast Fujian Television's drama series *Into Europe* (*Zouru Ouzhou* 走入欧洲). Produced in the late 1990s, it was one of a number of dramas about audacious Chinese migrants who make it in the world. There, the protagonist unveiled a similar scale model of urban modernity – for a Chinese trade city near Paris – to an applauding French audience (Nyíri 2006). Since then, the fantasy of a Chinese hero bringing modernity to the West has come close to turning into reality. Ronja Yu's documentary *Chinatown* chronicles the failed project

4 English in the original.

of a large Chinese product distribution hub combined with real estate development in the small town of Kalmar in Eastern Sweden, which hoped it would revive its flagging fortunes. One of the returning motives in the film is the scale model of the new city, with tree-lined avenues, condos, and streetlights: something clearly more metropolitan looking than today's Kalmar. The Kalmar project may have fallen through, but others are on the way in Illange-en-Moselle in France and in Milan, Michigan. Both are large aimed at attracting Chinese investors and providing them with residential real estate; the Milan project has the additional selling point of in-state tuition at the University of Michigan (Springfield News-Sun 2012). In the Golden Triangle SEZ, a scale model very similar to that developed for Kalmar – but complete with schools, hospitals, and airport – is on display in a special building.

**Figure 2.3** The KingsRomans casino by night



Danielle Tan, 2012

Many of the newly announced 'instant cities', like Bui City in Ghana – planned in conjunction with the Bui Dam – may never materialize. They may, like the scale models so far, remain simulacra of a reality whose materialization is delayed indefinitely. Others are struggling. In Peru, the Chinese

state aluminium company Chinalco is spending US\$50 million to build a new town next to the Morococha copper mine to resettle locals whose houses are in their way. With 1,050 new houses, the company describes this as the largest non-state 'social project' in the history of Peruvian mining. Nonetheless, it admits that not all locals have been persuaded to move (Guancha 2012).

Even so, the appeal of instant cities, both as investment hubs and as modern places, seems wide. As Easterling (2012) writes, the term 'city' is 'an enthusiastic validation of the zone's effort to evolve beyond its early identity as a remote locale for warehousing and transshipment ... [If] the zone banishes many of the circumstantial frictions of urbanity, it nonetheless welcomes a host of residential, business, and cultural programs'. The way a journalist describes the Morococha new town is typical of the developmental enthusiasm of these stories:

Unlike the precarious labyrinth of corrugated metal shacks and painted brick houses that make up the old town, the houses built by Chinalco all have quality inside plumbing and concrete walls.

According to a [...] mine official, most of Morococha's residents used to rent their living spaces. After the construction of the new town, some families own their houses and enjoy modern comforts that had not existed in Morococha before, such as running water, sewage, 24-hour electricity, and a police office. (Guancha 2012)

While the residential appeal of instant cities, particularly their low-end rural versions, may not be as high as hoped by the investors, it would be a mistake to dismiss them summarily as prestige projects intended to whitewash extractive exploitation. These new export products of Chinese urbanism are likely here to stay. They, in turn, are modelled on cities that sprung up in China's remote areas as a result of a sudden trade, commodity, or tourist boom, like Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan, Ordos in Eastern Inner Mongolia, or Ereen on the Mongolian border (on the latter, see Lacaze 2012, on suburban 'instant cities', see Weston 2012). But Boten and the Golden Triangle are what Aihwa Ong (2006) terms 'spaces of exception': places where rules are suspended. As she notes, writing about the CCTV tower in Beijing built by Rem Koolhaas, 'the play of exception permits the spectacularization of urban success as well as of national emergence' (Ong 2011a: 206). Ong's insight that spectacular architecture in contemporary Asian cities carries mixed symbolic meanings of capitalist modernity and national revival acquires a particular twist in the special zones of the borderlands where

the 'interactions between exception, spectacle, and speculation' (Ong 2011a: 207) are tied both to a discourse of the strong developmental state and one of freewheeling capital in particularly eloquent ways.

Another twist is that, in the borderlands, these feats of urbanization are turning spatial hierarchies on their head: the remote frontiers of the nation are, by virtue of their closeness to China, beginning to look more metropolitan than its very centre. Thant Myint-U, the US-educated grandson of UN Secretary-General U Thant, makes this very point in a recent book: 'It's a stunning reversal in Burma's geography. What had been remote is now closer to the new centre. What were muddy mountain hamlets are now more modern than Rangoon' (quoted in Deb 2011).

The spectacle of modernization is accompanied by a trenchant discourse. The Golden Triangle SEZ promises to 'lead local people to shake off the poverty and backwardness' of the 'wilderness of old days' into a 'modern economic development zone', a 'green ecocity with a population of no less than 200 thousand' in 10-15 years.<sup>5</sup> In this discourse, familiar from China, modernization is a journey along which humans and nature are transformed together with the investing company, so that 'inhospitable and ungovernable places [become] pacified, morally superior, and governable consumer paradises' (Tomba 2009: 610). At a ceremony in which KingsRomans donated fifty motorized rickshaws (*tuk-tuks*) to Lao residents in the presence of Lao Premier Thongsing, Zhao Wei urged them to 'change their traditional way of doing business' (LaoSEZ 2011). Promotional brochures combine the heroic language of conquering nature, which harks back to Maoist times, with the lingo of modern management and the vision of urbanization with the latest buzzwords of sustainability and environmentalism, which too are understood as features of modernity. Although the pursuit of capital is never far from the surface, promotional texts for both zones invariably include a promise of cosmopolitanism and world-betterment that goes beyond economic globalization.

It is easy to dismiss these promises as the sales pitch of Mong La 'drug lords wishing to launder their money' (Tan 2010: 6), for whom the Lao government's enthusiasm for special zones came as a godsend. But, as Keller Easterling (2012) has noted, special zones are fungible places where industrial modernity can 'breed promiscuously with other enclave formats ... merging with offshore financial areas, tourist compounds, knowledge villages, high technology campuses, museums and universities'. Why not,

5 See <http://www.kingsromans.com> and <http://www.laosez.com/html/tqgk/> (accessed February 16, 2011).

then, casinos? Indeed, Easterling (2012) goes on to suggest that, 'operating as it does in a frictionless realm of legal and economic exemptions, the zone, as it merges with other urban formats, perhaps most naturally adopts the scripts – the aura of fantasy – of the vacation resort and theme park'. But, crucially, this seeming playfulness takes nothing away from the economic and political seriousness of the project. The Lao government, for one, sees special zones as models of national development (Huang 2011), and this approach has been endorsed by UNIDO – the UN's industrial development organization – and the Asian Development Bank, which run a joint project to 'promote the development of special economic zones in Laos'.<sup>6</sup> Negotiations are underway between the Lao government and the management committee of Kunming's large High and New Technologies Zone to set up a 1,000 hectare zone outside Laos, with Vientiane City and Yunnan Province's overseas investment company holding 25 percent and 75 percent of the shares respectively (Chen 2013). This zone, with a registered capital of US\$128 million, would be Yunnan's first 'overseas cooperation zone' under a Chinese government scheme that provides official recognition and some financial support to selected special zones run by Chinese companies abroad (so far mostly in Africa). Neighbouring China, in the case of Laos, means importing its development.

## Freedom and Order

The explicit and elaborate claims to model modernity are underpinned by appealing to two powerful and conflicting discourses. One discourse, both visual and textual, consists of replicating the paraphernalia of the Chinese state, from communiqués to ceremonies, from banners to uniforms. These appear to have a dual function: they serve as a metonymy for the authority of the strong neighbouring state and evoke efficacy as a developmental regime by imitating the practices of a state associated with developmental powers.

The imitation of Chinese – and other lowland state – symbols and ritual by chiefs of upland Southeast Asian polities has a long history. Following Edmund Leach (1960) and other scholars, James C. Scott (2009: 7) points

6 Remarks by Sonam Yangchen Rana, UN Resident Coordinator, Lao Plaza Hotel, Vientiane, July 16, 2009; and Chong Chi Nai, ADB Country Director, *ibid.*, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2010. UNIDO was at the forefront of promoting export processing zones – an earlier form of special zones – in the 1970s but advised caution about the problems arising from their enclave-like nature in the 1980s (Easterling 2012).

out, for example, that the palaces, ceremonies, dress and cosmology of Shan rulers in pre-colonial and colonial Burma were based on Chinese models. Scott sees this 'state mimicry' as 'cosmological bluster', an attempt to conjure up the power of 'stateness' in the only familiar idiom (Scott 2009: 11). At the same time, he describes it as a strategy of 'symbolic subordination' to appease the lowland state that might be compatible with actual rebellion (Scott 2009: 7). When Chairman Zhao makes speeches about 'responsibility to history', 'rapid, healthy development', or 'promoting Sino-Lao friendship' (Hanzi 2010: 13-15), he is not just lionizing himself: he, too, is engaging in 'cosmological bluster' by borrowing the language of the state and of state enterprises that have, in the last few years, become the main builders of dams and roads across Laos, Burma and Cambodia, but also in Africa and elsewhere. This language affirms paternalism, order, discipline, and economic growth, and associates it with the PRC as a model.

The twist on this contemporary version of 'state mimicry' – fragile though it may be, as the Boten case shows – is that the developmentalism it has at its centre appeals to lowland Lao officials for whom the particular Chinese Communist idiom of stateness is familiar, yet also somewhat different from the Soviet/Vietnamese version in which they have been reared. Although special zones as a development model have been used by numerous Asian states, in Laos – as in Africa or Papua New Guinea – where they arrived only in the last few years, they have been specifically associated with China, where the first special economic zones, notably Shenzhen across the Hong Kong border, emerged in the late 1970s and became central vehicles and symbols of economic reform. Gradually, development zones became a ubiquitous device, both rhetorical and real, for local officials wishing to attract, and to project, economic growth, and were routinely included in tours for officials from 'developing' countries invited to visit China. According to a manager at Golden Triangle, Lao officials returning from trainings in China, particularly young ones, have been keen to apply the 'Shenzhen model' in Laos. It is easy to imagine that the familiar trappings of the state would have a reassuring effect on these officials – in turn engaged with an institutional rivalry with military units that are accumulating increased wealth, and thus influence within the state, by entering into joint ventures with Chinese rubber planters.

Yet next to state mimicry, a second discourse upon which claims of modernizing power are based is one of economic and social freedom from discipline imposed by the state. The vice-chairman of Golden Boten's administrative committee emphasized in an interview: 'This is the only SEZ in the world that investors have the most rights to invest'. Such competitive

claims to greater freedom are of course central to the attractiveness of special zones, not only for major investors but also to individual fortune-seekers, from gamblers to oilcake vendors. The prominence of gambling, drugs and sex is arguably not just a product of short-term profit seeking but a functional element of this discourse of freedom. Indeed, if the special zones feel both more regulated and more freewheeling than the national territory into which they are enclaved, it is perhaps partly by design. While workers and managers often invoke being outside China as an explanation for why certain rules – such as limits on working hours – do not apply, the same rationale is provided many times for other rules associated with more ‘developed’ societies – such as an absence of bargaining.

So can we still speak of ‘enclaves of order’ if order is just pretence?<sup>7</sup> What does it matter that the walls at Golden Triangle are covered with ‘notices’, written in the officialese of the PRC, warning of the severe punishment inflicted on those in possession of illegal firearms when the zone’s promotional brochure offers shooting with submachine guns? What does it matter that drugs are prohibited in similarly stern language but widely available? Easterling (2012) suggests that, upon closer inspection, all special zones are ‘at once the mascot[s] and contradiction of the basic tenets of “free market liberalism” ... the zone itself is a form of big governance par excellence, constituting a significant effort to thread together existing networks of global contractual relations in the absence of any robust international law’ even as they rely ‘heavily on terms like openness, relaxation, and freedom. Of course, Dubai’s Education City is a safer and tamer environment than Golden Boten. Nonetheless, even at Boten, there is far more surveillance than outside its guarded gates.

While the special zones in northern Laos are an extreme case, the dual discourse of Chinese investors as agents of top-down development and entrepreneurial freedom may in some ways be indicative of a broader range of state- and private-led Chinese-invested special economic zones, infrastructural projects and other concessions that have been proliferating around the world. Such zones have ‘emerged as ‘zones of awkward engagement’ (Tsing 2005) in which Chinese and local worlds meet, mix and clash (Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012). Much media and some scholarly attention has been paid to such projects, but it has been largely limited either to economic data or invectives about land-grabbing neocolonialism and Kremlinological second-guessing about the Chinese leadership’s designs. While state involvement and political motivations are clear in

7 I thank Martin Saxer for this question.

some development zones and extractive and infrastructural projects, the special zones of northern Laos suggest that other projects that are only loosely or not at all linked to the Chinese state at any of its levels display more parallels with the early nineteenth century free-trade imperialism pioneered by private capital that – like in the foreign concessions imposed on China after the Opium Wars – imitated state institutions largely to bolster its own respectability. Although it later became imbricated more closely with the military power of colonial states, the ideology of trading enclaves such as Canton rested upon the idea of economic freedom as the motor of a local developmentalism from which the population benefits as long as it submits to discipline. In the highlands of Laos and Burma, the revival of such concessions and the ‘awkward engagement’ that takes place in them has become central to neighbouring China. The region, with its history of overlapping sovereignty, fuzzy boundaries, and populations never quite subjected to lowland authority – the proverbial ‘Zomia’ of Willem van Schendel and James Scott – and more recently of military stragglers, insurgents and drug lords that united migrants from China, local ethnic Chinese and highlanders in their armies, has provided particularly fertile soil to adventurers that can alternately or simultaneously position themselves as fighters for freedom and harbingers of order (Nyíri 2012a). But the revival of concessions, not exclusively but to a substantial part linked these days to Chinese investors (Nyíri 2012b), is a global phenomenon that is no longer limited to poor countries but is increasingly penetrating the ailing peripheries of richer ones. Amidst the collapsing economy, soaring unemployment and multiplying neo-Nazi attacks that constitute the media image of contemporary Greece, a New York Times report shows half of the port of Piraeus leased for 35 years in 2010 by the Chinese investor Cosco as an island of economic success and job stability – with no unions and low wages. As Captain Fu Chengqiu, in charge of the project, declared to the reporter: ‘We showed the local people that we want to help them develop’ (Alderman 2012).





### 3 New Roads, Old Trades

Neighbouring China in Nepal

*Martin Saxer\**

#### Signs

On the wall of a rebuilt shepherd's shelter at the end of a remote Himalayan valley there is a trilingual signboard reading 'Karnali Gramin Trade Concern'. The signboard in English, Chinese, and Nepali belongs to a little shop that sells Chinese goods – batteries, beer, shoes, jackets, cigarettes, rice, flour, pots, etc. The shop is located at about 4,000 meters above sea level at the upper tip of the Limi valley in the district of Humla, Western Nepal. The place is called Tugling. The nearest airfield is several days' walk away. From November to May, the area is cut off from the rest of Humla. However, the Chinese border is close and a new road connects Tugling to Tibet.

A young entrepreneur, originally from a village nearby but based in Kathmandu, came back to establish the business. He bought a Chinese truck and installed a satellite telephone link. When I visited in autumn 2011, his younger brother was in charge of daily operations while he continued his business ventures throughout Asia. The trilingual signboard listed five telephone numbers in China, Nepal and India where he could be reached.

This shop with its cosmopolitan signboard has to be seen against the background of a larger and ongoing process in Nepal's Himalayas. Over the past decade, fervent road construction on the Tibetan Plateau has led to a situation in which access to many of Nepal's Himalayan border regions is now far easier from the Tibetan side than from Nepal's urban centres in the south. Several new Chinese roads lead to the northern border of Nepal, and some are currently being extended into Nepali territory.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence,

\* This chapter is based on field research carried out in Humla in September/October 2011 and October/November 2012 with grants from the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

<sup>1</sup> Apart from the Friendship Highway, at least half a dozen roads now reach the Nepal border or end very close to it. Four of them extend into Nepali territory, and two of them cross the Himalayan range. In the east, one road leads from Sakya to the upper Arun valley and almost down to the border at Kimathanka. A branch of this road leads to Riwu and is motorable almost up to the Tipta pass on the old trade route to Walung (see [www.theotherimage.com/series/walung](http://www.theotherimage.com/series/walung)). This has become an extremely important border-crossing. A second road leads to the

**Figure 3.1 The shop in Tugling, Limi**



Martin Saxer, 2011

many of the high valleys that traditionally served as pathways for exchange between the Tibetan Plateau and South Asia but fell into decline since the 1960s have seen a stark revival of cross-border trade. As these erstwhile crossroads of High Asia (Rizvi 1996) are, once again, becoming junctures of exchange, neighbouring China has come to shape many aspects of everyday life in the region. Road construction thereby plays a central, yet ambivalent, role.

Rongshar valley, with a side road branching off in the Everest region and leading to Gyaplung, just 6 km from the Nangpa pass that was the main trade route to Khumbu (International Campaign for Tibet 2003). West of the Friendship Highway, a new road connects Kyirong with Rasuwa, Syabru and Kathmandu. This connection, formally opened in 2012, is meant to become an alternative to the Friendship Highway (Campbell 2010, Tibet Information Network 2010). One road connects Mustang with the Brahmaputra valley and the east-west highway through Tibet; the stretch from the border to Lo Manthang has been completed in 2001 (Ghaley 2001). Since 2008 there is also a rough road down the Kali Gandaki to Pokhara and Kathmandu. Another road is planned through the Tsum Valley (Lama 2013) and there are at least two roads that end north of Dolpo; they are used by local traders and are visible on Google Earth. North of Mugu, there are no roads to the best of my knowledge. In Humla, there are two roads, one from Lake Manasarovar over Lapcha La through Limi (see [www.theotherimage.com/series/limi](http://www.theotherimage.com/series/limi)) and one from Hilsa through Yari and Muchu, finally planned to connect Simikot with the Tibetan border.

Roads receive uneven attention in public and in academia. Once built, as existing strips of gravel or tarmac, they are often just taken for granted and overlooked. The politics surrounding their construction and their value as signs of modernization and development, however, make the idea of the road a highly contested one. A road can stand for the promise of future connectivity and prosperity; at the same time, it can serve as a symbol for all that is wrong with modernity.

While big development organizations, including the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, continue to have faith in the ultimately positive effects of road construction, especially in rural areas (Escobal and Ponce 2003, Jacoby 1998, Ren and van de Walle 2007), anthropologists have pointed to discrepancies between rhetoric and reality. Anna Tsing (2005), for example, describes abandoned logging roads in Kalimantan as the scars left behind by the ruthless transformation of a jungle into a 'resource frontier'. The desolate logging roads are an index of failed development – they lead nowhere. In a similar vein, Pedersen and Bunkenborg (2012) argue that despite the rhetoric of connectivity roads may, in fact, disconnect rather than connect. Looking at Sino-Mongolian border roads and the interaction between local Mongolians and Chinese workers in the oil industry, they show how roads can serve as 'technologies of distantiation' (Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012: 563).

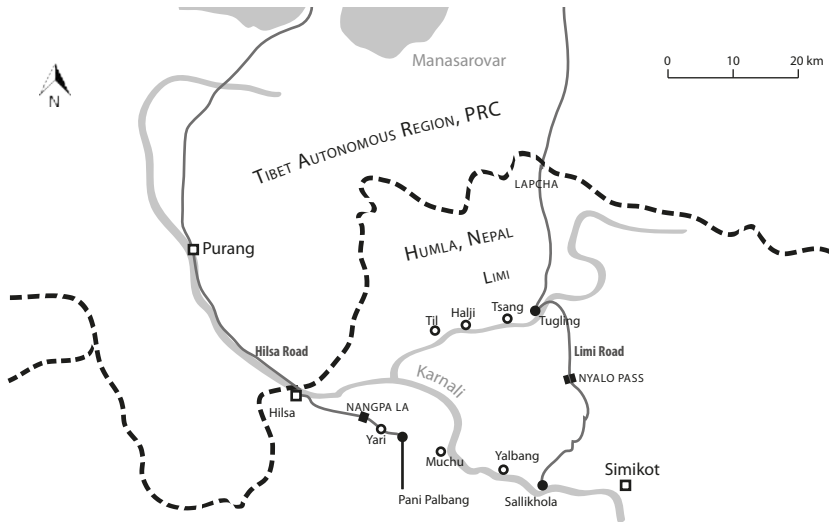
In the case of the Himalayas, Ben Campbell (2010) argues that a high-profile road project in Nepal has primarily remained a 'rhetorical route for development', which locals fear will not benefit them. Likewise, Jonathen Demenge (2013) shows for Ladakh that new roads to seemingly isolated places do not necessarily increase mobility.

The international press has been equally critical of Himalayan roads, although along slightly different lines: roads, it is assumed, will put an end to traditional ways of life. When a new road from China reached Upper Mustang, for example, Al Jazeera portrayed it as a fundamentally disjunctive event and ran a story entitled 'Mustang vs. China: A losing battle?' (Chao 2011); the Financial Times chimed in with a lead sentence stating '[a] new road is inching towards the capital of a hidden Himalayan "kingdom", bringing the modern world with it' (Grover 2011).

However, in a region that traditionally relied on intensive exchange with neighbours north and south, mountain tracks – and now roads – are the single most important infrastructures. The hopes they trigger, the socio-economic asymmetries they foster, and the opportunities they create are at the very core of social and political life in the Himalayas. The people I met during my research in northern Nepal neither necessarily fear the new

roads, nor do they believe that roads will bring ‘the modern world with them’, as the Financial Times assumes. Rather than leading to modernity (for good or for bad), the new roads are primarily conceived of as ways back to what is remembered as prosperous trans-Himalayan exchange. These may be new roads, but what they facilitate is an old trade: brokering between neighbours.

**Figure 3.2 Map of Humla**



Design: Martin Saxer, 2016

In this chapter, I focus on two new Himalayan roads in Western Nepal (see map, figure 3.2). Both link the district of Humla in the far north-western corner of the country with Purang and the Kailash region of western Tibet. The first road leads from Purang (Tibet) via Hilsa to Yari. I will call it the Hilsa road. It is officially endorsed but construction, which already started in the 1990s, has been slow. The other road, called the Limi road, was privately initiated in 2010. It leads across the high plateau that belongs to Limi VDC,<sup>2</sup> passes Tukling (the camp described above), and crosses the Nyalo Pass. The two competing roads are designed to meet midway between the Tibetan border and Simikot, Humla’s district headquarters. The politics and

2 The VDC, short for Village Development Committees, is the smallest administrative unit in Nepal. Limi is one of 31 VDCs in Humla District.

agonistic intensities of neighbouring that surround these two road projects are the topic of this chapter.

In what follows, I will first provide some brief historical background and outline the contemporary constellation that puts the art of neighbouring at the centre of people's endeavours and ambitions. Second, I will describe these ambitions, the institutions they revive, and the skills they require, and thereby explore the unfolding dynamics of neighbouring China in north-western Nepal.

## Background

For centuries, if not millennia, the Himalayas were a zone of contact and exchange – a world of motion, rather than a realm of unbroken tradition. Hermit monks, outcasts, rebels and traders came to the mountain valleys. They were joined by waves of immigrants fleeing the rise of the Mughal Empire in India, Gelug power in Tibet, the expansion of the Ghoraka kingdom in Nepal or, more recently, Communist rule in China.

The high mountains not only promised refuge, but also opportunities for trade. Separating the arid Tibetan Plateau from the hills and fertile plains of South Asia, the mountain range creates a differential between ecological zones and their respective economies and resources; brokering between the different demands of Tibet and the Indian Subcontinent has long been a crucial source of income in the Himalayas, especially since the higher valleys and villages do not guarantee agricultural or agro-pastoral subsistence. Tibetan salt, yak tails, sheep and pashmina wool were profitably exchanged for food grains from the hills and lowlands, as well as manufactured goods from India and beyond. Consequently, in the high Himalayas, wealth is traditionally associated with business. Quite in contrast to the image of the poor, rural, and isolated periphery, the Himalayas were home to a number of comparatively wealthy trading communities (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, van Spengen 2000, Vinding 1998).

A series of developments in the second half of the 20th century affected these established systems of exchange. Communist rule in Tibet set limits to private trade and the border demarcation between Nepal and the PRC in the early 1960s outlawed all but six border crossings. Although closure was far from universal and in many places only temporary, the entire border region was affected in one way or another. Well-established cross-border relations were severed and Himalayan valleys that once served as bustling trade routes of regional importance suddenly found themselves at the very

periphery. Furthermore, the introduction of heavily subsidized salt, fortified with iodine to combat goitre, undermined the profitability of the salt-grain trade in Nepal (Rauber 1980, Saxer 2013a). A phase of reorientation began and it seemed that the days of prosperous trans-Himalayan trade were over for good. In some areas mountaineering, tourism, and donor money gradually replaced trade as sources of income and targets of ambition; other areas simply impoverished (Bauer 2004, Fisher 1990).

When in the mid-1960s the so-called Friendship Highway, one of the two major routes between Kathmandu and Lhasa, was opened for motorized traffic, Nepali business people complained that Communist Tibet was poor and had nothing to offer. The *New York Times* cited a trader:

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. (New York Times 1964)

This asymmetry was even starker in Western Nepal. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, western Tibet remained dependent on grain imported through Humla. Wealth was certainly not universal, but Humla was still home to several relatively well-off communities (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, Goldstein 1975, Levine 1988, Rauber 1981). Since then, however, the situation has fundamentally changed. The rapid rise of China as an economic and industrial power, and the construction of new roads facilitating access to the goods produced by China's factories and agro-industries – among them the majority of the items listed by the complaining trader in 1964 – completely reversed the former trade imbalance. Today, Humla is one of the poorest districts of Nepal. Many households rely on government-subsidized rice and assistance by World Food Programme (WFP) to make ends meet. The region is attested levels of food insecurity comparable with the worst-affected areas in Sub-Saharan Africa (Nepal Khadya Surakshya Anugaman Pranali 2009, Regmi and Joshi 2008: 380, Roy et al. 2009).

The tales and memories of former trade-related prosperity, however, are very much alive. It is in the context of these memories that the majority of people I encountered during my research in the northern valleys of Nepal perceived the potential of the new roads.

I will now turn to the two roads that link Upper Humla with Tibet – the Hilsa road and the Limi road – and discuss how such memories of old trade shape the contemporary realities of neighbouring China.

## Paljor's Camp

In spring 2011, at the temporary head of the Hilsa road just below the village of Yari, a young man whom I will call Paljor, set up a tent shop to sell Chinese goods. I knew Paljor from my previous research when he was still the well-respected secretary of an NGO in Kathmandu. He was clearly a talented young man who skilfully managed to mediate between stakeholders, donor interests, local politics, and the curiosity of foreign researchers like me. I was surprised to learn that he left his job in order to sell Chinese merchandise in a green army tent at the end of a dusty road in Upper Humla.

Humla is not known to attract ambitious young people. Not only outsiders tend to imagine contemporary Humla as poor and desolate, the Humli themselves speak of their district as a difficult place to live. Leaving a good job in Kathmandu for a tent in Upper Humla thus seemed a rather unusual decision. But Paljor had analyzed the situation well: there was no road link between Humla and Nepal's centres in the south, and even the mule tracks were difficult to pass. Goods had thus to be flown into Humla and transportation costs were prohibitively expensive. Airfreight rates from Nepalgunj to Simikot, Humla's district headquarters five days south of the Tibetan border, varied between NRS 120 and NRS 240 per kilogram (US\$1.35 – US\$2.70), depending on fuel prices and seasonal demand. Shipping goods via the Chinese road network was much cheaper. Furthermore, Purang, the Tibetan town across the border, was booming. China's Great Western Development Strategy (*xibu dakaiifa* 西部大开发) brought investment to the region. Paljor reasoned that these developments, together with some recent progress on the Hilsa road, presented an opportunity.

Paljor was not the only one who saw this opportunity. While he planned to set up camp below Yari, a group of young local entrepreneurs bought a Chinese truck, pulled it across the river in Hilsa, and started offering transportation services on the 30-kilometer stretch between the border and the road head.<sup>3</sup> Using their truck, Paljor started importing goods from China and selling them in his tent shop.

His prices were moderately higher than in Hilsa or across the border in Purang, and in principle most of his customers would have been able to cross the border themselves. Residents within a 30-kilometer zone to both sides of the border are entitled to a so-called 'Entry-Exit Pass for

3 At the time of research in 2011 and 2012 the narrow suspension bridge across the Karnali River in Hilsa was the only link between the Chinese road and the road from Hilsa to Yari. However, in 2012 construction of a new bridge started.



Nepal-China Border Citizens', which facilitates free movement across the border within this zone.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the tent shop at the road head offered a distinctive advantage. Further north towards Tibet there are practically no grazing grounds for pack animals, and buying fodder can quickly become more expensive than paying the moderately higher prices in Paljor's camp. Moreover, traveling across the border to Purang, finding accommodation, and dealing with shopkeepers from Xinjiang and Lhasa is strenuous and time consuming. Paljor's customers were usually not the big and well-connected traders but people who had fields to harvest and families to attend to back home. They were happy to avoid the hassle and preferred doing business with a trustworthy countryman rather than directly engaging in neighbouring relations across the border.

When Paljor started his business in 2011, the technicalities of cross-border trade were straightforward. On the Nepal side, state authority was mostly absent. Although there were several small police posts in the area, the police hardly interfered with trade. There was no customs office in Hilsa, trucks had no license plates (there was no authority to issue them) and ran on smuggled Chinese diesel. Only the Communist Youth League, present in Hilsa with a solemn red flag on one of the houses, distributed a pamphlet stating that the import of alcohol (and the export of timber) were not only reprehensible but also, in fact, illegal. This relative absence of state power contrasted sharply with the situation in Tibet where the Chinese state was pervasive and omnipresent. However, if anything, the Chinese authorities encouraged the export of consumer goods and the formalities required were minimal.

Trying to make use of the particular positionality between neighbours north and south, Paljor, himself from a well-known Humli trader family, assumed the traditional role of a broker. In this sense, establishing a roadside business was a continuation of an old family trade. But Paljor felt yet in another way the in-betweenness of the situation. As a former NGO employee he was sensitive to issues of benefit sharing, participation

4 A special provision for the movement of border residents has been in place since the early 1960s. However, neither the agreements of 1950 and 1960, nor the 1961 Border Treaty or the 1963 Protocol mention any specific rules. Furthermore, in some regions along the border, the absence of settlements within the 30 kilometer zone on the Tibetan side has made the arrangement impractical. A commission looked into the practical problems arising from settlements just outside the 30kilometer radius in 1966 and again in 1986. In practice, the arrangement has been handled in a variety of ways at different crossings and times. Finally, the 'Entry-Exit Pass for Nepal-China Border Citizens' was introduced in 2006 (Kansakar 2001, Office of the Geographer Bureau of Intelligence and Research 1965, Shneiderman 2013, Shrestha 2011).

and environmental conservation. The idea of profit for the sake of profit clashed with his ideals. It was very important for Paljor to see and portray his endeavour as ethically sound and beneficial for the community around him. He condemned, for example, the highly profitable trade in cheap Chinese liquor for its devastating impact in the villages, and he also strongly disapproved of collecting *yartsagunbu* (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*, *dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*), the fungus sold for very high prices to China, Hong Kong, and Singapore.<sup>5</sup> The promise of quick money that drove hordes of young people to the mountains in spring, regardless of the dangers involved in collection and trade, was neither good for the community nor for the environment, he argued.

Over the summer, a few other young men followed Paljor's example and started their own shops at the road head below Yari. The roadside camp grew. When I asked Paljor if he did not mind the competition, he denied and said that he even encouraged them to join him. Paljor honestly considered his venture to be much more than just a profitable enterprise. He saw a perspective for Humla in the fact that one could make a living from legally trading simple goods like clothes and shoes – rather than trafficking animal parts and other illegal items for which Humla has once had a reputation.<sup>6</sup> He wanted to be a fair and mindful businessman facilitating access to affordable consumer goods in cash-strapped Humla.

Paljor's ethical reasoning may not be shared by the majority of businesspeople in the region. However, in the eyes of many, access to affordable consumer goods was not just an economic issue but a moral right, yet one that the state continually failed to guarantee. This emphasis on morality bears many similarities with Henryk Alff's observations of a 'moral economy' in the bazaars of Bishkek and Almaty, which serve a similar purpose (Alff, chapter 4, this volume; Scott 1976, Thompson 1966).

That Paljor limited his business to such simple consumer goods, such as clothes, shoes, soap, household utensils, and staples like vegetable oil and

5 *Yartsagunbu*, known as *dong chong xia cao* (冬虫夏草) in China, is collected throughout the Himalayas and has a decisive socio-economic impact in the regions where it is found (Devkota 2009, Lama 2007, Olsgard 2009, Sulek 2009, Winkler 2008, 2010). See also Eric Valli's film *Himalayan Gold Rush* on the yartsagunbu boom in Dolpo (<http://www.ericvalli.com/index.php?/films/himalayan-gold-rush>).

6 With the declining revenue from the salt-grain trade, many Humli traders shifted their business to other goods in demand, and in the late 1980s and 1990s, trade with animal parts such as tiger bones and antelope pelts was highly profitable. These items were once common, legal, and licit merchandise. With the international ban, trade moved to 'remote' border crossings such as in Humla. For a more detailed discussion see Saxer 2013a.

wheat flour, did not mean that Paljor's profits were meagre, however. At the time of my visit, he made around NPR 6,000 (US\$80)<sup>7</sup> in an average day – about as much as he had earned in a month in his former NGO job in Kathmandu. His friends operating the truck between the border and the road head earned considerably more, he said. They made three trips per day on the 30-kilometer road between Hilsa and Yari. They charged NPR 20,000 (US\$266) per trip, and thus generated a turnover of NPR 60,000 (US\$800) per day. According to Paljor, net profits were around 50 percent – NPR 30,000 (US\$400) per day, or roughly NPR 900,000 (US\$12,000) per month. Given that a good second-hand truck cost about US\$14,000 in Tibet, the owners were able to recuperate their total investment in just 35 days. The season lasted for more than five months.

**Figure 3.3** Paljor's camp



Martin Saxer, 2011

These figures are rough estimates, based on people's best guesses. They may not be accurate. However, the tales of these profits spread like a wildfire and captivated the minds of many. The opportunities the road and relatively open border presented changed ambitions and orientations, especially among young men.

7 The exchange rate in September 2011 was approximately US\$1 to NPR 75, in November 2012 about US\$1 to NPR 85.

## The *Entrepôt*

When I came back a year later in October 2012, Paljor's camp had moved a few kilometres further down to a place known as Pani Palbang. Instead of a single truck and a few shops, I found a veritable tent city with more than 30 vehicles, around 50 shops, and even an improvised service station.

The collective ambition triggered by the success stories of the road head pioneers had revived an old Himalayan institution: the seasonal trade mart. Much of the erstwhile trans-Himalayan trade relied on such *entrepôts* set up during the summer months in order to barter Tibetan salt for Nepali grain. The salt was brought from the salt lakes on the highland plateau by yak caravans and reloaded onto pack animals better suited for the temperatures in Nepal's valleys. In Humla, dzo – cross-breeds of yaks and cows – as well as goat and sheep were used for this purpose. The locations of these *entrepôts* were shifting over time, but the names of the famous trade marts are still widely known. Although yaks have since been replaced by trucks in Tibet, the institution of the seasonal *entrepôt* seemed to lend itself well to the current constellation.

Among the new traders in Pani Palbang's tent city was Dorji, a former classmate of Rinzin, my friend and research assistant. Dorji's tent was one of the most spacious in Pani Palbang. It featured a stove, a sitting area, and two large shelves on which the merchandise was displayed: on one side clothes, footwear, household items, and sweets imported from Kashgar; on the other side beer, liquor, soft drinks and more expensive running shoes brought from Lhasa.

I had met Dorji the year before in one of the villages along the way, where he was working as schoolteacher. He struck me as unusually enthusiastic about his profession. He told me proudly that his students had passed the national exams with a much higher average than students from other rural schools. 'One day, we will beat Kathmandu!' he said. But just like Paljor's, his ambitions and dreams had changed. Over the winter, Dorji had married and come to the conclusion that his teaching job with a monthly salary of NPR 9000 (US\$106) was not going to be enough to cater for a family. Hearing all the success stories of his peers who had ventured into business – and ignoring all the stories of those who had failed – he decided to try his luck in trade himself.

Dorji offered us butter tea, Lhasa beer and Coca Cola. He had the habitus and posture of an experienced businessman. He smoked Chinese cigarettes and had gained some weight since we had last met him. Rinzin could not help commenting – as a compliment more than as a criticism – on this

striking transformation. Dorji proudly told us how he went to Purang, the town across the border, with nothing but a thousand rupees in his pocket (US\$11). As many fellow newcomers, he was dependent on other people's capital. His first step was thus to find potential investors. Friends introduced him to two businessmen, a Hui from Xinjiang and a Khampa from eastern Tibet. He convinced them to provide him with tent and an initial stock of goods worth a total of NPR 300,000 (US\$3,530) – without any form of security, he added with a smile.

Dorji's account made me think of the words of an elderly Humli trader who, remembering the situation in the early 1970s, told me how hungry Tibetans on the other side would beg his party in tears to barter salt for grain with them – despite the threat of punishment for breaking the government monopoly that ruled out private trade until the reforms of 1979-1980. Within a generation, the tides had turned and the Humli traders had become dependent on the capital, trust, and goodwill of their partners on the Chinese side. However, the neighbouring situation as such, and the skills required to make use of it, were not fundamentally different. It is worth noting that Dorji did not approach potential investors within his family or his village. He went straight to Purang to establish relations regardless of ties of commonplace or ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> What he was looking for was not just starting capital but potential long-term partners on the other side, people with knowledge and networks reaching beyond the immediate context of the borderland.

In the heydays of caravan trade, the ideal of ceremonial friendship, known as *miteri* in Nepali and *dropo* (*grogs po*) in Tibetan, was the model for such relations (Messerschmidt 1982: 275-278). Such friendships asserted in ritual were not exclusive and traders would rely on several such partnerships. Ceremonial friendship ties were instrumental in long-distance trade as they provided the partners with hospitality and inside knowledge away from home. Ceremonial friendship introduced a dimension of stability to the vagaries of border trade. Twenty-first century capitalism may require a different mode of partnership and, perhaps, rely on different forms of ritual; it remains to be seen whether the business relations Dorji established in 2012 will be stable. However, the fact that two businessmen from altogether different backgrounds decided that giving Dorji credit was a worthwhile venture may be taken as a hint that all parties involved envisioned at least the possibility of a longer-term engagement.

8 Despite being ethnically Tibetan, Khampa (people from Eastern Tibet) are not considered to belong to any form of in-group in this respect.

There are no houses or other permanent infrastructure that would require investment and bind people to a place, and thus there was always the risk that Nepali traders would simply decide to break camp and disappear without paying back their debts. The evanescence of the institution of the seasonal trade mart makes it not only adaptable to changing constellations; it also requires a high degree of trust.

This uncertainty and fragility grew with the size of the Pani Palbang trade mart. As an increasing number of people were investing their energy and money, and as more and more trucks and mule drivers were offering their transportation services, the basic parameters of the constellation were changing as well. While people like Paljor and Dorji made solid profits from simple goods like clothes, shoes, wheat flour and detergent, others started venturing into riskier and potentially more profitable domains, which in turn began to attract more scrutiny by the state.

In 2012, one of these highly profitable ventures was China-bound trade in Paris polyphylla (*qiyezhizhuhua* 七叶一枝花), a medicinal herb locally known as *satuwa*. The root of *satuwa* is used for treating fever, headache, and livestock poisoning. In China, a variety of other conditions, including ulcers, tonsillitis, rheumatism, are treated with a decoction of the root (Madhu, et al. 2010). The plant grows at medium altitudes throughout the greater Himalayan region and is also collected in Humla, although on a relatively small scale compared to other commercially traded species. In 2012, however, a Chinese businessman allegedly began buying large quantities of *satuwa* through a representative in Purang. Rumour had it that he was willing to invest RMB 30 million (US\$4.9 million) in one season alone.

Soon, demand outstripped local supply, and people started importing *satuwa* from the herb markets in Delhi and Amritsar. By late summer, these supplies dried up and *satuwa* roots were imported from Pakistan and allegedly even from Afghanistan. As there were no roads that connected Humla with the south, the roots had to be flown into Simikot. On a daily basis, chartered airplanes would land in the district headquarters and bag after bag of the herb would be strapped onto the backs of mules and transported up to the Tibetan border – a trip that takes five to six days. While in 2011, most of the pack animals I witnessed going up to the Tibetan border were empty; in October 2012 all of them were laden with *Paris polyphylla*. I witnessed caravan after caravan moving up to the border.

*Satuwa* is considered a rare and vulnerable species in several places, but it is not officially a threatened species. Neither the CITES appendices<sup>9</sup>

9 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, see [www.cites.org](http://www.cites.org).

nor IUCN's Red List<sup>10</sup> include *Paris polyphylla*. Thus, trade in *satuwa* is technically legal – given that all the customs procedures are followed and the plant is not collected in a protected area. Legitimate road transport via the Friendship Highway between Kathmandu and Lhasa would have been feasible and also cheaper than chartering aircraft and mule caravans. Nevertheless, the herb was channelled in massive quantities through the border crossing at Hilsa.

Apparently, there was a working agreement at the border that facilitated import without formalities, bypassing Chinese customs and import procedures. The latter would normally imply sampling, testing, and plant quarantine for medicinal herbs following the same strict rules as the import of vaccines or antibiotics. Although Chinese law does provide an exemption for locally traded herbs at remote border-crossings, *satuwa* bought in India or Pakistan would probably not fall under this provision (China's State Food and Drug Administration 2001, Saxer 2013b: 110-113). However, nobody I talked to was aware of any of these regulations. The arrangement simply worked, which was all that mattered. According to Dorji, net profits for Nepali traders – after all expenses, including charter flight and mule transport – were still around NPR 200 (US\$2.35) per kilogram. Demand seemed bottomless and the starting capital required to set up a deal was allegedly easy to find. The opportunity was so good that several people around me considered investing.

The combination of existing infrastructure (the road, trucks, airplanes and mules), an abundance of people willing to invest and take risks, a vibrant trade mart that functioned as *entrepôt*, a remote border crossing that promised a degree of illegibility, and a Chinese or Tibetan official willing to cooperate trumped the fully legal channel through the main highway between Nepal and Tibet – despite much cheaper transport. The constellation, however, was not to last. In early November, the arrangement bypassing Chinese import procedures came to an end. Entire shipments of *satuwa* were returned and people began stocking the herb in Hilsa, waiting for a chance to complete the transactions.

At the same time, another basic arrangement came under pressure. The traders in Pani Palbang used to import Chinese wheat flour beyond its official shelf life. On the arid and cold Tibetan Plateau, an expiration date means little anyway, and expired flour was much more affordable for the customers in Humla. Now, the Chinese authorities began enforcing a ban on the export of this wheat flour. Stocks in Pani Palbang quickly dried up

10 International Union for Conservation of Nature, see [www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org).

**Figure 3.4 Simikot airport**

Martin Saxer, 2011

and soon the mule caravans began coming back empty. I assume that the Chinese ban in the name of food safety and avoiding a potential health incident in Nepal was linked to the heightened scrutiny in the context of the now defunct *satuwa* arrangement.

Dorji, who had not invested in *satuwa*, was nevertheless affected by the wheat flour ban. However, the season was coming to an end and he considered his first year of business a success. He had sold his initial stock of goods, bought new supplies, and paid back his debts. Estimated net profit of somewhere between RNP 200,000 and 300,000 (US\$2,350-3,530) would result. Although nowhere as lucrative as Paljor's shop in the first year, this would still account for five to six times his former salary.

In summary, we see that the collective ambition to profit from the emerging trading opportunities triggered a revival of the old institution of the seasonal *entrepôt*, which serves as zone of engagement for intensive neighbouring. However, the case of *satuwa* also shows that the *entrepôt* lends itself well not only to the seasonality of trade but also to the boom-and-bust quality of larger-scale frontier capitalism (Tsing 2005). The temporality of the trade mart facilitates quick adaptations to changing circumstances. Similar to the situation at the Sino-Vietnamese border that Zhang describes in chapter 9 (this volume), continuous legal uncertainty



and confusion do not undermine the neighbouring situation – they have to be seen as generative aspects of neighbouring because they produce the shifting differentials that present themselves as opportunities.

The situation, as described up to this point, can be summed up as follows: the new road and a relatively permissive border regime created opportunities for those quick enough to capture them, and the *entrepôt* has emerged, once again, as zone of engagement, as a hot spot for active neighbouring. However, people did not benefit equally from this constellation. Asymmetries abounded – not only between China and Nepal, but also between those places along the main artery of trade and those further away from it. Road construction clearly amplified these asymmetries.

Dalakoglou and Harvey (2012: 460) note that despite the pervasive role that mobility plays in the contemporary lives of people around the globe, one could also argue that ‘never before have so many people felt so deeply the consequences of their exclusion from a condition where mobility is embraced as a correlate of freedom (to trade, to work, to travel, etc.)’. This assessment fully applies to the present case. The question is: what do those who feel this exclusion do? This leads us to the second new road in Humla’s north, the one through Limi.

## Building a Road

The Limi route was once equally or even more important for trade than the route which the Hilsa road now follows. Several places along this route are known as sites of former trade marts. Place names such as *tsongsa* – literally: the market place – are a testimony to this past. After the demarcation of the border in the early 1960s, however, the Limi route quickly fell into decline. As it was not included in the list of the six official border crossings between China and Nepal, trade via this route was no longer legally possible.

In 2010, Tsewang Lama, a former member of parliament and assistant minister from Humla came up with an ambitious plan to address this issue. He gathered a group of local business people, some from Limi, and some from other parts of Humla. They all witnessed the food crises in Humla and the beginning boom in western China, and they all agreed that progress on the official Hilsa road was painfully slow. Thus, they started exploring the possibility of an alternative road following the ancient trade route through Limi.

This route, they argued, offered a number of advantages for road construction. On the Chinese side, existing dirt roads used by the Chinese border patrols connected the border with the road along the shores of

Lake Manasarovar; the first section in Nepal would lead across a high plateau at about 4800 meters above sea level, where road construction was comparatively easy. From there, the route led down to Takche and Tugling (described in the opening vignette), then up a wide alpine valley to the Nyalo Pass (5000 meters above sea level) and finally down to Sallikhola, where it would one day meet with the projected Hilsa road, about half way from the Tibetan border to Simikot, Humla's district headquarters. Even with limited funds it would be possible to reactivate this former trade route. The benefits for the local population would be immediate because the road would make basic necessities of daily life – wheat flour, detergent, clothes, shoes, etc. – more affordable, not just in Upper Humla but also in the lower parts of the district. At the same time, the road would provide opportunities for trade and income generation in hitherto disadvantaged areas of Humla. And, as this was a collective local effort, the risk that rent-seeking officials or profit-oriented contractors would try to fill their own pockets seemed comparatively low.

Road construction is usually a business of states and major development banks; a local initiative to build a road across the world's highest mountain range may thus seem adventurous. However, given that the neighbouring situation with 'rising' China was quickly becoming a pervasive reality, and given that the question how connections are forged and maintained lay at the heart of socio-political life in Humla, the bold move of regaining control over the region's connectivity was also just the most logical thing to do. A Road Construction Committee was formed and with the help of Tsewang Lama, who was familiar with the jungle of Kathmandu politics, the Committee managed to obtain modest seed funding from the government. This was a good sign and raised hopes that the project had a chance to garner long-term state support.

With the government funding in hand and high hopes for more, the committee approached a major Nepali construction company and convinced them to put an excavator at their disposition – despite the fact that there would be no easy way to retrieve the equipment from Limi should the project stall. The committee also talked the Chinese officials into letting them ship the excavator via the Kathmandu to Lhasa and Lhasa to Ngari highways to western Tibet and finally across the border back to Nepal; furthermore, the Chinese side agreed to provide a limited amount of diesel to run the excavator and open the border crossing for limited local exchange and transportation of rice in the name of development aid.

In 2010, the year before Paljor started his tent shop on the Hilsa road, construction began on the Limi road, and by the end of the year the fist

section from the border to Tugling was successfully completed. An official Chinese delegation came to attend the inauguration ceremony, thereby giving their seal of approval to the revival of cross-border relations between Tibetan speakers on both sides. A year later, in early autumn 2011, the road had crossed the Nyalo Pass and in summer 2012 the last section to down to Sallikhola, the future intersection with the proposed Hilsa road, was completed.

The difficulties to overcome had been massive and more than once, the project's fate was in limbo. In the second year, it became clear that the seed funding originally earmarked for the project would not be easy to get released. There was a rule that said that local road construction was not to employ heavy machinery. Current legislation demanded that, if an excavator was to be used, the project had to undergo a proper e-bidding process. This rule, designed as anti-corruption measure, was introduced on suggestion by an international development organization. While funding was withheld, local business people stepped in with loans, knowing perfectly well that the risks were high. In the end, a pragmatic solution was reached and construction contracts for the final sections of the road went through the anonymous e-bidding process.

Despite such hiccups, more than 100 kilometres of road were built in less than three years – a considerable achievement compared to the mere 30 kilometres in 16 years on the Hilsa road. This achievement was a result of perseverance and skilful negotiations with Tibetan authorities, customs officials, and army commanders in the north as well as Nepali officials, construction companies, and the political establishment of Lower Humla and Kathmandu in the south. Relations with each of these parties followed their own script, their own style and temporality. In other words, the road was an outcome of intensive neighbouring.

The troubles in the final year of construction, however, also left their scars. The anonymous e-bidding process undermined trust among former partners; disputes about maintenance obligations, unequal benefits from the road, and the schedule for promised road-extensions to nearby villages eroded the sense of working towards a common goal. In addition, concerns about negative effects of the road became louder. Would the road open the door to deforestation? Wood from Humla was in high demand across the border in Tibet. Pack animals carrying wooden beams up to the border were a frequent sight on the trails. However, the length of the beams and the total volume transported were limited. Trucks and the road clearly had the potential to change this radically. What if the Limi Road became synonymous with a trafficking route for illegally cut wood or other illicit

items? The semi-open border could be sealed at any minute and all the work would then be in vain. Uncertainty and confusion were not over; maintaining the neighbouring relations required constant effort.

Rinzin, my friend and travelling companion, was a trained forester and saw these risks with sorrow. However, walking through Humla, we also kept meeting (or hearing about) old friends who had left school before graduation and were now seeking their fortune in trade. The new roads and the booming China business made many young people re-evaluate their options, and education, preferably in a college in Kathmandu or abroad, was now longer automatically considered to be the main avenue for upward mobility. Musing on these observations, Rinzin shook his head and said, 'Everybody is a businessman now'.

### **Conclusions: A Question of Orientation**

The stories of Paljor and Dorji, as well as the case of the Limi road construction, are expressions of a particular positionality between neighbours north and south. A border regime characterized by permissiveness (Kalir and Sur 2012), investment and infrastructure development in Tibet, and the two new Himalayan roads accentuate this in-betweenness. In this constellation, northbound relations across the border with Tibet are always in one or another way linked to southbound relations with Lower Humla and the rest of Nepal. The result is an entangled double neighbouring situation, which involves a variety of activities and processes: reviving the institution of the seasonal trade mart, securing loans in China, negotiating with local authorities in Tibet, lowland construction companies, Kathmandu bureaucrats or a village leader in the next valley, and dealing with rules and moralities introduced by NGOs and powerful development agencies ('third neighbours', as Bulag would call them, chapter 5, this volume) are all forms of contemporary neighbouring.

I have argued that the specific forms neighbouring have to be understood against the background of historical Himalayan brokering between the Tibetan Plateau in the north and the hills and plains in the south. Neighbouring is an old trade, or, more precisely, the contemporary form of neighbouring China has revived old trades. However, this does not mean that things went back to how they were before the 1960s. The contemporary asymmetries are clearly different from the old ones. The ecological differential between the salt-rich highlands and the grain-rich lowlands that was the basis of trade for centuries has been almost completely replaced by

differentials based on industrial production, transportation costs, and the geopolitical situation. Moreover, as the case of the *satuwa* boom shows, the remoteness of Humla has become an asset in a certain way, as it promises a degree of illegibility. These new asymmetries are arguably more prone to rapid change than the ecological differentials on which trade was traditionally based.

Some institutions, like the seasonal *entrepôt* as locus of active neighbouring, seem perfectly amenable to deal with these new and assumedly less stable asymmetries; other institutions, such as ceremonial friendship, may be superseded by new forms of establishing and maintaining trust. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether the new roads continue to benefit local entrepreneurs in the ways they do now. Once the roads are completed, other financially more potent actors may appear on the scene. However, considering the trilingual signboard with the five telephone numbers on the rebuilt shepherd's shelter in Tugling, I doubt that this niche will soon disappear. Putting all the confusion and uncertainty to productive use requires much local experience and the social and linguistic skills of local entrepreneurs; the scope and reach of their networks give them a considerable edge. After all, one thing seems clear: unlike the abandoned logging roads left behind by ruthless frontier capitalism in Kalimantan, which Tsing (2005) describes so aptly as 'leading nowhere', the two Himalayan roads described in this chapter do lead somewhere – metaphorically and physically. These roads are hardly the last chapter in the history of trans-Himalayan neighbouring relations.

**Section 2**  
Neighbouring beyond Proximity



## 4 Trading on Change

Bazaars and Social Transformation in the Borderlands of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang

*Henryk Alff\**

### Introduction

Narratives of post-Soviet trade experiences often convey a certain ambiguity. Their connotation staggers between nostalgia and ongoing socioeconomic hardship, between the uncertainty of the frequent change of rules and the promise of evolving opportunities. When 46-year-old Marzhan, a single mother of two children, elaborates upon her life course since Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, it comes as an unbelievable story amidst the scenery of shipping containers, rushing cart-pushers delivering enormous bales of goods along the rows, and the ubiquitous scent of Chinese textiles. Her initial trade activities at ad-hoc open-air bazaars in Almaty- Kazakhstan's former capital and most populous city some 360 kilometres from the Chinese border- indeed have been driven by socioeconomic necessity, a sense of responsibility, and entrepreneurial fortune-seeking. Over the years, she has gradually acquired, expanded and validated business contacts as she skilfully navigated economic, juridical and political uncertainties. Nowadays, with enormous efforts and capital invested over the past decade, her flourishing wholesale business of Beijing-manufactured, self-designed outerwear at Almaty's Bolashak Bazaar has become a highly dependable source of income.

The sprawling bazaars in Almaty (Kazakhstan) and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), as the backdrop of Marzhan's narratives, are the ethnographic locus of this chapter. In the past decades, these bazaars have evolved into major nodes of post-Soviet retail and wholesale trade networks (see Spector 2008, 2009, Nasritdinov and O'Connor 2010). The bazaars in Almaty locally known under the Russian generic expression for flea market (*barakholka*)

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**Figure 4.1 Borderlands of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang**



Design: Henryk Alff; Cartography: Silke Dussmann

are a labyrinth of containers and hangar-sized warehouses along a several kilometre strip on both sides of the city's northern ring road.<sup>1</sup> The bazaar is not just a place of ubiquitous consumption, but also an important place for employment.<sup>2</sup> The second largest bazaar in Barakholka is Bolashak, which consists of 3,500 sales booths and warehouses in the form of standard 10-, 20- and 40-foot shipping containers stacked up in two-storey rows. The ground-level containers are usually used as sales booths and the second-level containers as additional storage space for merchandise. In 2006 Bolashak's estimated annual sales, predominantly in textiles, were valued at least US\$660 million (Kontinent 2006). By 2011, according to data provided by the bazaar administration the number of entrepreneurs exceeded 7,000.

1 Almaty's retail and wholesale bazaars since summer 2013 have been subject to considerable urban redevelopment, in the course of which container bazaars have been replaced by shopping centers.

2 In 2007-2008, Barakholka's bazaars were responsible for an estimated 5.1 percent of local employment (World Bank 2009: 10).

Impressive as it may seem, the size of Almaty's Barakholka Bazaars, of which Bolashak is only one of the 28 (by other accounts 35), appears miniscule in comparison to the Dordoi Bazaar – Barakholka's counterpart and competitor across the border in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek. 'Dordoi Republic', as it is called by the Russian edition of the Forbes magazine - due to its inherent dynamics as a 'state within a state' and its strategic importance for the country's economy (Forbes 2011)- was founded in 1991 by the former functionary of the Communist Party's youth wing, Askar Salymbekov. Over the years, it has developed into a bustling centre for the re-export<sup>3</sup> of predominantly Chinese-made consumer goods to other Central Asian Republics and the Russian Federation. From Dordoi, Chinese goods are shipped to cities as far as Moscow, Novosibirsk and Yakutsk. Dordoi encompasses a vast area between 53 to 100 hectares in the northern outskirts of Bishkek, which accommodates a large number of sales booths counting somewhere from 6,000 to 17,000.<sup>4</sup> The Dordoi Bazaar operates almost exclusively in the form of double-stacked shipping containers lined up in rows along heavily frequented passageways. Before the 2008 worldwide financial crisis, the estimated monthly sales of textiles, household appliances, electronics, and construction materials were worth US\$331 million with three million customers visiting the bazaar monthly (World Bank 2009). Although sales have come down considerably for various reasons since 2008, there still are approximately 30,000 to 40,000 traders, vendors and transport providers making a living from Dordoi. According to a report by the German development agency Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the total number of people employed at the Dordoi bazaar is even several times higher (GIZ 2011).

Despite the centrality and prominence of the bazaar economy in this region, scholarship on the dimensions and the everyday mechanisms of bazaar-based trade is limited. With a few exceptions (Angermann 2006, Nasritdinov and O'Connor 2010, Spector 2009, Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009, Zhaparov 2009, Özcan 2010), current studies of post-Soviet transformations in Central Asia have not yet paid enough attention to this essential aspect of economic life. Much of the recent work on China's rising impact in post-Soviet Eurasia has focused on geopolitical issues of inter-state cooperation

3 In this context re-export means the export of imported goods by Kyrgyzstan due to favourable customs duties and without value added through further procession.

4 The large variance in the data provided in various sources stems from counts at different periods. While Nasritdinov and O'Connor give a number of active stalls of 6,000, as a result of their mapping of Dordoi in the winter of 2006 (Nasritdinov and O'Connor 2010: 73), a recent GIZ report puts the number at 17,000 (GIZ 2011: 14). A World Bank report overestimates the number of sales points with 40,300 (World Bank 2009: 10).

in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the rhetoric of the 'new Silk Roads' or 'new Great Games' (Karrar 2009, Clarke and Mackerras 2009, Laruelle et al. 2010).<sup>5</sup> While these lines of inquiry are important as a starting point, this chapter seeks to go beyond the 'container perspective' of a state- or area-centred approach by focusing on localized relations as well as the dynamic mobilities of people, goods, and values between various locales. This chapter traces the multi-level interrelations that contextually shape, and are being shaped, by bazaar-based trade across China's north-western borderlands.

The question I address in this chapter is how bazaar traders, operating from quite a distance from the actual borders with China, use their social skills, knowledge and ties to survive and prosper in the volatile context of cross-border trade and exchange. Their social relations across and often far beyond borders, in fact, condition a 'neighbouring situation' that continues to reproduce the volatility that facilitates their entrepreneurial success. I argue that in this context, the 'art of neighbouring' is one of distant arrangements where actors engage with one another in strategic ways to cope with challenges and vulnerabilities. At the same time, neighbourly relations *at a distance* continue to shape livelihoods of traders who rely heavily on cross-border economic activities.<sup>6</sup> I thus deem the conscious valorization of these business relations between the local and the translocal a neighbouring practice, as they clearly remain functionally linked and embedded into 'spaces of engagement' (van Schendel 2005) that are made up by a relational (rather than strictly territorial) understanding of borderlands. This type of 'neighbouring', which is a deliberate and habitual social practice in borderland bazaar traders' everyday life, will be the first focus of this chapter.

Micro-level trade dynamics, however, are just one part of the story this chapter tells. The commercial activities of bazaar entrepreneurs are closely tied to state-led modernization schemes and their outcomes. A case in point are Beijing's far-reaching multi-billion dollar development programs in Western China.<sup>7</sup> The explicit goal of these development programs is to

5 Millward (2009) gives an insightful account of how the official Chinese metaphor of a 'new Silk Road' is distinguished from the western one: 'Whereas outside China the cross-cultural exchanges of the 'Silk Road' can serve as a heart-warming counter-argument to the 'clash of civilizations' world view, Chinese silk-roadism is more parochial and nationalistic' (Millward 2009: 55).

6 Participant observation and unstructured biographical interviews were conducted by the author at Barakholka's Bolashak Bazaar in August-September 2011, April and October 2012, and Dordoi's Kitai Bazaar in March-May 2012.

7 Western China, as defined in the framework of China's Great Western Development strategy, comprises more than 70 percent of China's territory that is considered peripheral

turn China's West from a remote frontier into a transport corridor and a vibrant space for trade (Goodman 2004, Shih 2004). In a similar way, recent modernization schemes in Kazakhstan- which include the on-going implementation of a Customs Union with Russia and Belarus since 2010 and the establishment of the International Centre for Border Cooperation at the Sino-Kazakh border- not only dominate the public discourse in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also directly affect the conditions for trade. State-driven modernization projects have, in fact, not only defined the larger context of trade but also specifically targeted nodes of small-scale trade networks such as border crossings as well as urban bazaars.

The impact of modernization projects on established practices of trans-border trade is the second focus of this chapter. I examine the ways in which power asymmetries within and between these various sites set particular conditions within which bazaar entrepreneurs are able to (or fail to) develop their businesses. I analyse how bazaar entrepreneurs contest the change of rules and accommodate novel modes of distribution. Given the importance of trade to a large proportion of Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's (self-)employed population, it is important to highlight the mechanisms behind diverse trans-border trade activities. However, because of the ambiguous nature of these (extra-)legal trade activities, and the fact that most shipments are transported by avoiding customs duties and taxes, there is a high degree of secrecy surrounding the channels of supply. Trans-border trade therefore entails a certain degree of resistance against propagated rules and the official terms of legality. Taking it as an essential everyday skill, traders have learned to adapt to top-down interventions as they work with their 'neighbours' across the border to actively contest, subvert and circumvent respective rules. Their active engagement with state rules and with one another has in turn played an important part in shaping the actual outcomes of the modernization drive that has swept across the borderlands. For bazaar entrepreneurs, a crucial everyday skill in this context is to actively anticipate future change and make use of its potential in the best possible way through strategic collaborations with their close neighbours. To put it in a different way, active neighbouring conditions the possibility for success as bazaar entrepreneurs participate in and trade on change.

and largely populated by 'minority nationalities' (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). Western China includes six provinces (Gansu, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Yunnan), five autonomous regions (Guangxi, Ningxia, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang), and the municipality of Chongqing.

## The Roots of Post-Soviet Trade

In the borderlands of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang, neighbouring is not necessarily based on geographical closeness, although the 'neighbouring situation' first and foremost suggests a sense of proximity. While physical proximity often conditions frequent interactions as an inevitable part of daily social life, it is not a prerequisite for making connections and forming relations in the borderlands. In fact, trans-border connections can be negotiated between rather distant nodes in a widely spun translocal network of trade (Karrar 2013). These nodes – bazaars, production facilities, border crossings, or transport hubs – are located hundreds of kilometres away from each other and away from the border or the urban centres; but they are crucial points of connection, interaction and exchange. They help to stretch trade networks when business is thriving; and they contract when the local and regional political-economic situations change, making the neighbouring situation elastic in a way.

Right after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the spatial and social organization of trans-border trade was rather different. Marzhan, like many of my interlocutors, remembers how in the early 1990s the Kazakh border village of Khorgos and the nearby cities of Yining (Kulja) and Zharkent (formerly Panfilov) faced an unexpected boom in cross-border trade with consumer goods. Ad-hoc traders, individually or in groups, came all the way from Almaty and Bishkek to barter away what was left from Soviet state enterprises, including residual production and scrap metal, for cheap Chinese consumer goods. Over the 1990s these trade patterns changed for reasons yet to be fully understood.

Today, Zharkent is a sleepy border town that does not seem to capitalize much on its strategic position anymore, even with the advantage that Zharkent residents are entitled to enter China and stay for 24 hours once a month without a visa. Local traders in Zharkent's central market informed me that Chinese consumer goods now make a loop to Almaty's bustling Barakholka Bazaars first before being shipped back to the border town itself.<sup>8</sup> Almaty- and Bishkek-based wholesale merchants today take over the lion's share of trade. These merchants serve as redistributors of goods and

8 There are different views on the role of the immediate borderland communities in trade activities. Spector has also observed that communities residing close to the border are largely omitted by trans-area trade flows (Spector 2009, see also Parham 2009). A World Bank report published in 2007, however, sheds a different light on the success of the Khorgos crossing and the strategic positioning of border communities in trade development (World Bank 2007).

facilitators for the mobility of people and commodities. In China, the immediate border towns, though thriving in comparison to their counterparts on the Kazakhstan side, are outplayed in their significance by Urumqi, the rapidly growing capital of Xinjiang located 670 kilometres from the Kazakh border at Khorgos. Urumqi has become the major transport and trade hub in the course of China's Great Western Development campaign (Raballand and Andrésy 2007: 244-246, Sadovskaya 2012: 91). Roads, railways and pipeline constructions further amplify Urumqi's role as a transit hub on the projected economic and development corridor between Coastal China, the Middle East and Western Europe (Zhao 2001).<sup>9</sup>

Far away from the Sino-Kazakh border, Almaty's Bolashak Bazaar carries this vision of economic prosperity and development already in its name. Literally meaning 'future' or 'progress' in Kazakh, 'bolashak' connotes aspects of actively moving towards, or crafting progress without carrying the imprint of the past. With all hopes invested in the future, the Bolashak Bazaar and other contemporary bazaars make the impression of relying on centuries-old trade networks and routes of exchange along the 'Silk Roads'. Many of my interlocutors insisted on some sort of historicism claiming that these networks and routes are inherent to the local systems of distribution and consumption for ages.

The Bolashak Bazaar was founded only in the mid-1990s allegedly by private investors whose identities remain a mystery.<sup>10</sup> Local legend has it that these black market 'profiteers' were the pioneers of contemporary bazaar trade, who established their business through flourishing connections in the 'second economy' and to leading political circles during as early as the late Soviet times.

Back in those days, 'profiteering' (*spekulatsiya*) as bazaar trade (and any form of private trade) was pejoratively referred to, was a serious criminal offense and was broadly condemned as immoral and uncivilized. Despite that, the acquisition of highly desired but otherwise unavailable goods was practiced to some degree all over the Soviet Union. This practice required a skill in building and maintaining personal relations (*blat*), which when performed in private, aptly and effectively was considered a perfectly

9 The annual China Eurasia Expo, for example, is currently promoted by Chinese officials as a flagship event for opening-up and trade development with neighbouring states at the 'new Silk Roads' (Kontimost 2011).

10 While in Kazakhstan the identity of bazaar proprietors and their connections to leading political circles remain largely a matter to rumours (Spector 2008), bazaar proprietors in Kyrgyzstan are well-known public figures due to their presence in political life, often being members of parliament or in other high-ranking administrative positions.

acceptable (or licit) social behaviour in order to deliver and acquire deficient goods and services on an everyday basis. Caroline Humphrey notes a similarly ambiguous representation as outlined above in her assessment of post-Soviet trade: 'Reactions to the facts of trade emerge from the under-swell of the habitus of people's life, which was formed in Soviet times but is now [after the dismantling of socialism] undirected and contradictory' (Humphrey 2002: 175). Hence it makes sense to inquire deeper into how strategies, directions and experiences of trade practice continue to inform and to be shaped by this ambiguity nowadays.

## Routes and Connections

From the Soviet era to the contemporary, the representation of bazaar trade in the region has always provoked a mixed sentiment among traders who continue to borrow the Soviet rhetoric of condemning the 'shadiness' and immorality of profiteering in the bazaars, and at the same time sing praises of the tantalizing profitability that bazaar trade offers (Alff 2015). Marzhan, as one of the most experienced entrepreneurs at Bolashak for example, often switches between condemnations of what she perceives as 'uncivilized trade' in the bazaars, in the following associated particularly with poor working conditions, and its (illicit) profitability:

As many others, I started here hawking merchandise in open-air market stalls all year round. Working conditions have not improved much since the containers are in place. It's still incredibly hot in summer and freezingly cold in winter. But nowadays hard work, 10 to 12 hours each day, pays out for me.

Having endured the arduous years since she first started her business, Marzhan was able to gradually expand the reach of her business relations. After quitting her underpaid job as a lawyer in 1993, she became active in the so-called 'shuttle trade' (*chelnochnaya trgovlya*) – a common way to make a living in the years after the end of the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> Being a shuttle trader, Marzhan first imported small quantities of Chinese textiles from

<sup>11</sup> Spector's seminal work (2009: 98) provides a cautious estimate of 100,000 to 170,000 people in Kazakhstan being involved into transnational trade during the 1990s. For Kyrgyzstan, she estimates that out of a population of 5 million people in 1996 between 500,000 to 800,000 were involved in trade on an occasional or permanent basis (Spector 2009: 58-59).

Urumqi's *Bingtuan* (兵团) wholesale trading centre with the assistance of interpreters and middlemen. After a temporary setback during the 1998 financial crisis in Russia, Marzhan and her business partner Adil expanded into the wholesale business. Today they rely on well-established personal contacts with manufacturers in eastern China, a strategy that has allowed them to bypass middlemen services in Xinjiang to cut costs. In 2005, they started working with a factory in Beijing to supply fashion apparels for men and women. This business generated a remarkable sales turnover of up to US\$1.5 to 2 million per annum. Marzhan and Adil's orders from Beijing are pressed into large bales, transported overland by train and truck across Western China and the Khorgos border to Kazakhstan – at peak seasons several truck loads per week.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from experienced Kazakhstani<sup>13</sup> entrepreneurs who have learned to successfully navigate the broader trans-border marketplace that links China to Central Asia, traders from other origins also started to expand the existing networks and bring in new dynamics to the booming bazaar trade. One of the rather new phenomena is the increasing proportion of traders, salaried vendors, drivers, cart-pushers and caterers from Kyrgyzstan in Almaty. Their arrival in the Bolashak Bazaar contributes to a much more complex neighbouring situation in the borderland trade networks. Among those who operate their business in Bolashak's 14 rows of double containers (approximately 130 containers each), the majority of vendors are believed to be Kyrgyzstani. A large number of them went to Bolashak after a series of recent political turmoils in their home country in 2005 and 2010 respectively.

Not unlike the Han-Chinese businessmen who used to form a large community at Bolashak and the other bazaars of Barakholka throughout the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> Kyrgyzstani bazaar entrepreneurs and employees are currently the

12 The major reason why entrepreneurs still prefer small-scale, ad-hoc trade units over formal companies or trading firms is the low taxation and customs duties. The juristic person of the firm is often taxed in a close-to-exploitative way in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

13 The term 'Kazakhstani' is utilized throughout this text for the citizens of Kazakhstan, while 'Kazakh' refers to the ethnic group only.

14 The Han-Chinese traders were forcibly driven out the bazaar economy through high 'fees' that were imposed on them in Kazakhstan, others were virtually deported from Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan. According to the head of Bolashak bazaar administration in Almaty in 2011, there were just about 80 to 100 Chinese traders left, most of whom employed Kazakhstani vendors at their sales outlets. Despite xenophobic sentiments in Kyrgyzstan, the Chinese established wholesale businesses at Dordoi and Karasuu bazaars thanks to a much more liberal climate there. Han-Chinese businesses have been the target of violent attacks in the past. During the Bishkek riots of 2005 and 2010 the Chinese shopping centre GOIN was burned down twice. The Dzhunkhai section of Dordoi, dominated by Han-Chinese merchants, was destroyed by a fire as well in 2008.



main targets of increasing resentment by local Kazakhstani traders, who blame them for using price dumping to manipulate local competition. Azhar, for example, a 36 year old Kyrgyzstani woman selling tights just a few steps away from Marzhan's thriving fashion business, complains that she and her compatriots are controlled and frequently harassed by Kazakhstani state officials, especially from the immigration agency. She only has non-resident status in Kazakhstan, and therefore no legal right to operate a private business. Lacking proper residential registration, she is forced to keep bribing officials if she plans to stay in Kazakhstan for longer than five days. However, unlike the Han-Chinese in the 1990s, the Kyrgyzstani entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan do not face the same kind of rigid exclusion and they continue to occupy a dominant position in bazaar trade. This is partly due to their stronger socio-cultural linkages in the Kazakhstani society as in comparison to the earlier Han-Chinese migrants. The Kyrgyzstani resilience in the bazaar economy is also a result of their thriving distribution networks and the mutual support they provide to each other. Azhar says, 'Kyrgyz stick together when doing business; they give discounts and sell goods on commission to each other, but not to Russians or Kazakhs'.

Although Azhar moved to Almaty as a salaried vendor back in 1998, she still maintains close contacts to Kyrgyz and Dungan<sup>15</sup> wholesale suppliers at the Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek. Until recently, Azhar used to return to Bishkek to stock up with supplies at least once every two weeks and often more frequently. Wholesale prices for Chinese-made textiles purchased from her Dordoi-based business partners are negotiable. Azhar is able to get very good prices even on small quantities and sometimes to even get goods on credit.

Azhar's supply base is the Kitai Bazaar, established in 1992 as one of the earliest sections of the Dordoi Bazaar in Bishkek, which now is surrounded by other sections with cosmopolitan names like Evropa (Europe), Kerben (caravan) and Alyaska. Its name – *Kitai* means China in Russian – refers to the foremost origin of traded commodities. At Kitai's 34 parallel rows with each row consisting of more than 30 shipping containers, cheap and low-quality textiles, accessories and shoes are sold. The first two rows of the Kitai Bazaar are always busy with wholesale clients arriving from

15 Dungan is an ethnonym commonly used in the former Soviet Union since 1924 for Muslim Chinese groups that are known as Hui or huizu (回族) in China. Sizeable Dungan communities living in south-eastern Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan, claim ancestry to Hui refugees from Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, who fled the Qing Empire after turmoil in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gladney, 1996, Ding 2005, Allès 2005).

**Figure 4.2 Dordoi Bazaar's main passageway, Bishkek**

Henryk Alff, 2012

Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, who navigate their way through the narrow passageways between the shipping containers and Dordoi's heavily used main thoroughfare. The Kitai Bazaar is dominated by Dungan and Kyrgyz traders and vendors. Han-Chinese merchants are hardly visible at all nowadays, as they tend to employ local vendors to run their shops. Bazaar entrepreneurs at Kitai source large amounts of cheaply produced textiles either from business partners in China or locally from Han-Chinese suppliers and warehouse owners at Dordoi.

Dungan and Han-Chinese wholesalers are often mentioned together in one breath. Some Dungans work for Han-Chinese as interpreters or shop assistants, presumably on the basis of cultural and linguistic affinity (Zhaparov 2009), while others have established their own wholesale and transport businesses. Unlike Han-Chinese traders who are often accused of aiming to take over the market by unfair means, Dungan traders are seen in a more positive light. Even many Kyrgyz consider them to be genuine Muslims, honest, loyal and hard-working. The Dungan community at Dordoi is often portrayed as socially cohesive, which can be confirmed by my own observations at the Kitai Bazaar in Bishkek.

Dungan merchants have profited tremendously from their role as facilitators for wholesale trade. Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union,

Dungans in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan recovered and rebuilt contacts with Hui and Han-Chinese in China, either through (imagined) kinship ties or ethnic-religious affiliation (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009).<sup>16</sup> Rashid and his wife, for example, are influential Dungan traders in the business of wholesale trade with China. Their ancestors settled from Gansu to the vicinity of Bishkek (then Pishpek) in the late 1870s.<sup>17</sup> Rashid, who claims to have been a pioneer of the 'China trade', remembers the time when 80 percent of his fellow traders at the Kitai Bazaar were Dungans. As he puts it:

Dungans were the first who established trade between Kyrgyzstan and China in the early 1990s, together with the Uyghurs, who later predominantly switched to the catering sector. Some of us had remote kinship ties with places in China where our ancestors originally came from. These social contacts were not maintained during the Soviet times and thus of little use for most of us. But we still gained from being able to communicate with the Chinese in their native language at least on a colloquial level and, thus, have a common language when negotiating deals.

Rashid has been renting a small 10-foot sales container at a comparatively central position in the bazaar for the past 15 years. He sells cheaply produced woman's sportswear in bulk. While Rashid is in charge of supplies, his wife is usually running the sales point at the Kitai Bazaar, serving customers predominantly from Kazakhstan and Russia or retail sellers from Dordoi Bazaar itself. In the past, Rashid would travel to Urumqi every two to three months to stock up with merchandise. Nowadays, he prefers to make orders over the phone or by e-mail and payments via a mutually agreed transfer system with his Hui business partners in Urumqi. This saves him time and money. Goods are then shipped by the Hui-owned transport companies via Kashgar and the Torugart pass to Bishkek, which takes a maximum of 15 days.

Looking at the experiences of Marzhan, Azhar and Rashid, it is striking how patterns, orientations and directions of petty trade, as well as their

16 During conversations with Khuzei Daurov, the head of Kazakhstan's Association of Dungans who was also a former consultant of President Nazarbaev and a successful businessman, he spoke extensively on the role of historic and newly established ties of Dungan communities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan with Hui partners all over China and even as far afield as Malaysia (Personal communication with Daurov, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012).

17 In the Soviet times, and still to some degree nowadays, Dungans are renowned for running highly competitive agricultural and catering businesses both in northern Kyrgyzstan and parts of south-western Kazakhstan (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009: 105-106).

strategies, have changed over the past two decades. Within both the commercial and the social structures of bazaars like Bolashak in Almaty and Kitai in Bishkek, a diversification is under way in terms of the ownership of and access to social as well as material resources. Nowadays, only a few of the traders at Bolashak and Kitai who started in the early and mid-1990s are still personally involved in selling goods at the bazaar stalls. Many have ventured from the retail business into the much more profitable wholesale trade. Wholesalers like Marzhan usually own or rent a number of containers at one or several bazaars and employ salaried vendors, cart-pushers and other staff.

Marzhan's long-distance connections link her with Han-Chinese business partners in Beijing; while Rashid and Azhar's strategies are being built on 'neighbouring-at-a-distance' on the basis of (imagined and actual) ethnic and linguistic affiliation. Their stories depict how bazaar entrepreneurs make flexible adaptations to the changing social conditions and charting new relations across borders. Geographical distance in all three cases does not exclude – and in a certain sense even fosters – socioeconomic closeness, whereas immediate vicinity often enhances competition among traders. Neighbouring in the borderlands of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang, in this case, can be productively 'elastic', and distance is not necessarily what stretches it. Both the entrepreneurial mobilities and the socio-spatial ties of bazaar traders extend beyond what one would conceive of as the immediate borderland. Everyday trade practices of Marzhan, Rashid and Azhar, thus, involve and are shaped by some sort of scalar variability or fluidity (Brenner 2001: 592). To put it in a sociospatial way: their neighbouring practice appears to be neither locally nor regionally framed or bounded, but tends to be rather translocal. This means neighbouring is constituted (and constantly re-constituted) by dynamically changing social relations across (often geographically distant) places (Freitag and von Oppen 2010). The following section seeks to elaborate on how schemes and outcomes of large-scale development interventions affect this specific ('elastic') configuration of neighbouring.

## Modernizing Trade

In April 2012, when I met Rashid again, his supply chain was still running smoothly. However, he saw himself confronted with decreasing sales, especially with customers from Kazakhstan and Russia. Rashid and many fellow traders at the Dordoi Bazaar attributed this slump to the on-going

implementation of the Customs Union (CU) between Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus.<sup>18</sup> Customs regimes changed and control was tightened at the Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan-China borders, both of which are enforced as the CU's external border since July 2011. This development posed a threat also to the distribution schemes of trade entrepreneurs like Azhar. She began to find it more and more tricky and time-consuming to import goods from Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan. Just a couple of weeks before I met Azhar the second time in April 2012, she started purchasing goods locally from one of the other wholesale bazaars of Barakholka, which apparently was a much less profitable endeavour.

The CU is, however, not the only top-down intervention that has affected established businesses. Top-down developmentalism, usually in the name of modernization,<sup>19</sup> targets multiple scales ranging from the planned reconstruction of Almaty's Barakholka bazaar agglomeration (Spector 2008) to new regulations for self-employment in the retail and wholesale sectors in Kazakhstan that came into force in early 2013. All of these interventions challenge the existing trade networks and strategies.

Such interventions, however, are not new. Deliberate and often forceful reform efforts from as far back as the late Qing and Tsarist periods more than a century ago had changed lives in significant ways in today's borderlands of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang. More recently, since the late 1990s, China's Great Western Development campaign has come to shape both rhetoric and infrastructure in Xinjiang. Accelerated development plans and the 'new Silk Roads' initiatives aim at fostering mutual exchange and cooperation with neighbouring states in order to boost domestic economic growth (Zhao 2001: 202). These development interventions often result in pronounced economic trans-border asymmetries, not least in trade balances. China has become by far the most important exporter of consumer goods to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (World Bank 2009, Kaminski and Raballand 2009). On the one hand, this has, just like the immigration of

18 A tripartite CU between Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus came into existence in January 2010. The long-term objective is to launch a Common Market referred to as Eurasian Economic Union (agreed upon by the three presidents in May 2014), using the example of the European Union as a role model.

19 Modernization is understood here according to the three-fold epistemological distinction of development by Thomas (2000). The meanings or senses Thomas attributes to development, can be subsumed roughly as long-term social change, as an ideology of change and as an intentional practice of change. Modernization, as a dominant notion of gradual top-down transformation or in the Chinese political-economic thought of termed path-dependent development (Luo 2009), needs to be explored in its interrelation with small trade primarily in the two latter meanings, put forward by Thomas.

Han-Chinese, provoked wide-spread and often exaggerated fears of Chinese expansion both in Kazakhstan (Sadovskaya 2012: 121-126) and in Kyrgyzstan (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012: 109). On the other hand, traders in the region such as Rashid and Azhar benefited greatly from China's rise and its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.<sup>20</sup> Due to the low customs duties and taxation for (and lack of control of) imports from China, wholesale prices of consumer goods at Bishkek's Dordoi Bazaar are still much lower than in neighbouring Kazakhstan, giving it a competitive edge in the business of re-exporting Chinese consumer goods to markets across Eurasia.<sup>21</sup>

Trade statistics in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan hide the real dimensions of imports from China. Only the official trade revenue between China and Kazakhstan as reported by Kazakhstani statistics has increased more than thirty-fold from US\$400 million in 1992 to US\$12.3 billion in 2008 (Alff and Schmidt 2011: 74).<sup>22</sup> According to Chinese statistics, exports to Kazakhstan in 2008 were more than twice as high as imports from China reported by Kazakhstani sources (Syroezhkin 2009: 231). This is clearly due to the fact that trans-border trade generally evades official Customs payments and thus goes unregistered. Imports of consumer goods from China to Kyrgyzstan are as well severely underreported in the official Customs statistics. Their estimated value was US\$3 billion in 2008 – ten times more than the officially reported figure (Kaminski and Raballand 2009, USAID 2010).

Partly as a response to these imbalances, Kazakhstan's leadership promoted their own modernization agenda.<sup>23</sup> Official documents and public announcements by President Nursultan Nazarbaev, especially since the financial crisis that hit Kazakhstan's fast-growing economy in 2007 and 2008, have called for an increase in Kazakhstan's economic competitiveness, first and foremost, by boosting domestic industrial production

20 Kyrgyzstan became a WTO member in 1998.

21 These favourable conditions have also contributed to the upcoming sewing industry in northern Kyrgyzstan. Since the start of the millennium, a light industry of up to 5,000 small and medium-sized sewing manufactories has been set up in Bishkek due to the cheap garment imports from China, the relatively low cost of manpower, and the subsidized electricity. In 2010, between 90,000 and 150,000 people were employed in this sector of the Kyrgyzstani economy (SIAR Research and consulting 2011).

22 Future projections on bilateral trade turnover with Kazakhstan for 2015 go as high as US\$40 billion (People's Daily 2011b).

23 The modernization discourse in Kazakhstan takes up notions both of the former Soviet paradigm of progress and rather novel expressions of competitiveness and innovation (see e.g. Ministry for Communication and Information 2011).

and technological innovation (see e.g. Ministry for Communication and Information 2011). The trade sector also ranks high on Kazakhstan's modernization agenda (Ministry for Economic Development and Trade 2010). The country's geographical position at an important Eurasian crossroads is advocated in large-scale projects aimed at increasing the transit of goods across its territory by road and rail.

The first stage of the bilaterally planned International Centre for Border Cooperation (ICBC) at the Chinese-Kazakhstani crossing point of Khorgos, was opened to the public in April 2012. ICBC, regarded as a flagship project to further facilitate trade of all kinds, occupies a total area of 528 hectares, divided between both states. Under this initiative, a special regime is instituted to facilitate visa-free entry for both SCO and third-country passport holders for a duration of up to 30 days, and free movement of people through special cross-border corridors within the zone. Potentially relevant for small trade entrepreneurs, a special bilateral customs and taxation regulation was introduced for ICBC declaring a duty-free regime for goods not exceeding RMB 8,000 or US\$1,230 in value per person per day (People's Daily 2011a). Kazakhstan's section of ICBC is designed to include a centre for small-scale trade, seven modern hotels with a total capacity to accommodate up to 5,000 people, logistic terminals, and many other facilities. By 2035 the Kazakhstani side of ICBC shall be upgraded to the status of a special economic zone under the name 'Eastern Gates'. With the Chinese government's commitment to revive trade, special economic zones in the Chinese part of Khorgos and in Kashgar are declared to boost economic exchange and interaction (People's Daily 2011b). Despite the wide-spread fear of Chinese economic expansion and the implementation of the CU, the former secretary-general of SCO, Muratbek Imanaliev, like other top officials, praised ICBC's potential:

Considering the strategic location of the centre [...] one could state that the foundation of ICBC Khorgos is an important project in the non-commodity sector of the economy. It is able to provide a powerful stimulus to the development of a whole complex of customs, transport, trade and tourism infrastructure of the region. (People's Daily 2011b).

Quite in contrast to the hubris surrounding ICBC, Bolashak traders I talked to remained sceptical of its potential benefit for their own supply chains. They stated that they would rather keep relying on their existing networks. Additionally, as Marzhan emphasized, ICBC was simply too far away from the manufacturing centres in China to be a compelling option for making

purchases. Contrary to the situation in the early 1990s, the immediate borderlands were no longer the most important arenas for skilful neighbouring – at least for wholesale traders like her. One of the main factors for Marzhan's success was the carefully maintained relations with her partners in Beijing and with her representative in Urumqi being in charge of communications with the former to organize supplies and delivery. The promised rather than delivered economic incentives by large-scale state-led schemes, on the contrary, are nowadays perceived to play only a minor role in activities by many traders.

State-led development efforts and their outcomes are nevertheless not to be looked at separately from the agency of bazaar entrepreneurs like Marzhan, Rashid or Azhar. The following section points out that the discourse around and dealing with large-scale state interventions, in fact, contributes to changing societal representations and the renegotiation of trade practice at bazaars. On the one hand, bazaar trade nowadays is often said to ensure the access to consumption to broader circles of the society against counterproductive modernization efforts of the state authorities. On the other, top-down measures, despite local traders' scepticism, increase the relevance of immediate borderland communities in the exchange processes, particularly in terms of the ongoing creation of the CU. The renewed involvement of immediate border communities adds another dimension to the 'art of neighbouring', namely the processes in which borderlanders broker or mediate the shipment of goods across the border. These processes of constant (re-)negotiation and re-scaling of social relations illustrate the considerable impact of trader strategies on the contradictory and highly unpredictable outcomes of state-led development efforts, as well as the gains (or losses) derived from this uncertainty. The capacity of bazaar traders to employ a particular set of social skills is what ensures their economic survival and successful neighbouring amidst large-scale interventions.

### **Strengthening Trust, Acting Morally**

Marzhan's story is a testimony to the emergent class of self-employed wholesale traders who have benefited from economic growth and infrastructural improvements in (and beyond) western China. These traders are dependent on favourable and flexible relations across the border. The timely and financially tenable production and the delivery of goods, therefore, depend closely on trustworthy personal networks between



traders, producers, transport providers, Customs officials and customers. It is this very practice of navigating constraints and opportunities by way of constantly investing in social relations and networks, which can reach as far as Beijing or Guangzhou that reveals the 'art of neighbouring' in action. These networks have often been built over years (if not decades) through close cooperation; they therefore entail essential qualities and values, with trust being particularly important.

Both Marzhan and her business partner Adil constantly stress the paramount importance of trust, which is both crucial in critical situations and vital for everyday business. As Adil puts it: 'We are exclusive distributors of our products in Central Asia [...] We have signed a contract with our partners in Beijing. They agreed to keep our seasonal collections under tight wraps and not sell it to competitors from Central Asia. So far, they have kept their word'. For Adil, the fact of 'not cheating and not being cheated' is among the most important principles in building trust. According to Marzhan, building trust with Chinese business partners is first and foremost a matter of intercultural sensitivity:

I have several friends in this row of stalls working with China, some of them successfully, others not really. But I can confidently say that no one is able to speak with the Chinese like I do. And this is not because I am successful in business but because communication with Chinese follows certain rules, which not everyone understands.

Reflecting on their success, Adil and Marzhan highlight the trust-generating effect of working together with confidence over a long period of time, and through periods of crisis, to their mutual benefit. On one occasion, while praising her business relations, Marzhan explains that during periods of closed borders her partners in Beijing even sent goods by plane to speed things up and secure her urgent supplies. In this particular situation, she mentions the notion of *guanxi*, which is in a certain sense a Chinese counterpart of the Russian notion of *blat*.<sup>24</sup> Since the end of the Soviet Union the relevance of *blat* in economic life is often believed by many traders to have become restricted to close social bonds and replaced by a stronger impact of monetary aspects beyond that. Yet, the influence of *guanxi*, as Mayfair Yang argues in her seminal work (Yang 1994: 2002), continues to shape business

24 *Guanxi* such as *blat* refers to interpersonal exchange systems based on social ties that ensure the reciprocal access to certain resources (Ledeneva 1998).

interactions and relations since China's opening-up.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that Yang suggests an increasing role of *guanxi* in strategies 'to locate and maintain supply sources for new commercial ventures (Yang 2002: 463) In trans-border bazaar trade, *guanxi* has taken on a translocal form and become an essential element in the 'art of neighbouring' relevant for business.

Following Marzhan and Adil, the sensitivity to social properties, honesty, and skills in intercultural communication help build trustful relations. Together with sufficient financial means, they are critical for a successful wholesale business that relies so much on a smooth, timely and cost-effective supply chain. It is here that the monetary extensions of *blat* and *guanxi* – bribe (*xinghui* 行贿, *vzyatka*) – come into play. In Marzhan's case, deliveries from Beijing to Almaty took somewhere between five days and more than a month in autumn 2011, depending on the situation at the Khorgos crossing.<sup>26</sup> Though reluctant to talk about the details, Marzhan says that she is not paying official Customs fees for her shipments. Marzhan blames the inevitable corruption and the lengthy delays at the Customs when goods are properly tariffed for this practice. Instead of choosing the 'formal' way, which Marzhan considers a waste of time that could easily ruin her business, she relies on the services of an experienced local Kazakh 'Customs broker' from the Chinese part of Khorgos, who is well acquainted with Customs officials on both sides. He successfully manages, so far almost without loss, the clandestine nightly transport of Marzhan's goods in the stowage of overland busses. The drawback of this method is that Marzhan's goods are considered contraband in Kazakhstan. Thus the threat of confiscation always looms large, even after the merchandise has safely arrived in Almaty. This, in turn, requires more bribes to more officials. Taken all costs into account, Marzhan and Adil earn a net profit of just about 10 to 20 percent on the final wholesale price, which they negotiate individually with their customers. This margin,

25 Granzow, too, discusses the role of *guanxi* in Chinese entrepreneurship as being either temporary or enduring aspects of China's modernization (Granzow 1995: 191-194).

26 Restraints to and interruption of cross-border trade occur frequently and can be caused by different factors and events. Yet most predictable are closures before and after public holidays in China, self-evidently, less so during social unrest in Xinjiang or power shifts between officials for the distribution of resources in Kazakhstan. In early May 2011 Kazakhstan's mass media reported that Customs and security service officials at the Chinese-Kazakhstani crossing points of Khorgos and Kalzhat were sacked by special police forces. In the aftermath of these events high-ranking officials were convicted of being responsible for the organization of large-scale contrabandism and money-laundering. Huge amounts of goods were confiscated and the border crossings remained closed during the busy summer months.

however, enables Marzhan and Adil to be part of Almaty's upper-middle class. They drive a Lexus sedan and own several apartments in different parts of Almaty.

Given the profits of her wholesale business and the essential skills and resources, Marzhan contends that her trade business has achieved a new stage of proficiency:

How many years I have worked in this sphere of business? I know every detail – for example, how to identify trends and how to sell a product in demand. [...] I travel four, five times to Urumqi and Beijing each year. I go alone so that nobody disturbs me. I always think on my own and choose the products needed. In every respect, this is a creative type of work, and not just a profane buy-and-sell business.

During conversations with other wholesale entrepreneurs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, I heard similar stories. Former 'shuttle traders' often highlight their contributions to the ongoing formation of sophisticated, if still widely considered informal or 'unorganized' trade. Zhibek Azhybaeva, the deputy head of the Kazakhstan Association of Bazaars in Almaty, states in an interview:

Bazaars, in fact, have developed into quintessential incubators for business development. In particular, at bazaars people find out whether [trade] is an attractive type of business for them, or if one has come there coincidentally. [...] those, who worked at the bazaar for two years, will continue to do so and increase their business. The one, who could not withstand the challenge, leaves and searches for another way of earning his subsistence.

The entrepreneurial spirit of self-reliance and 'being one's own boss' are highly praised among those who succeed. Gradually, the negative stereotypes against bazaar trade and its allegedly chaotic, unproductive, and low-class nature are being challenged. In addition, bazaar entrepreneurs cast wholesale trade as an altogether different affair than preceding forms of ad hoc trade practice. This styling of wholesale trade as a sophisticated art of doing business is accompanied by the traders' rise in social status and authority. Improvement in social representations of trade entrepreneurialism and the recognition of its significance in terms of welfare and employment in general enforce claims of morality, which could be brought in line with the notion of a 'moral economy'. This concept was

developed by E.P. Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976) in their seminal works on eighteenth-century England and twentieth-century Southeast Asia. In Thompson's conception the term refers 'to confrontations in the market-place over access (or entitlement) to "necessities" – essential food' (Thompson 1991: 337-338). He describes the beliefs, usages, forms, and deep emotions that surround 'profiteering' and 'the marketing of food in times of dearth' (Thompson 1991: 337-338 in Edelman 2005: 331). Scott confines 'moral economy' rather to questions of reciprocity between ruling elites and peasants in terms of 'what states and elites may claim' or commodify, and 'what they must, in turn, provide in times of necessity' (in Edelman 2005: 332).

The most important aspect of morality in bazaar trade concerns the vendor-customer relationship, or what Thompson calls 'confrontations in the market-place'. More specifically, what is at stake is the universal access to affordable goods that bazaars, unlike shopping malls, are able to provide to the low-income population. Marzhan argues:

Our target groups are lower middle-class or average consumers. For them the price is what counts. It's a matter of fact that most of them are not from Almaty, where people are far better off, but they come from regional centres in provincial Kazakhstan where incomes are considerably lower. Therefore, we cannot continually raise our prices.

The other central aspect of morality in bazaar trade, closer to Scott, is the 'right to employment'. While skilled employment, particularly in the state-run sectors, is still much sought after, access to such positions is restricted to professionals and therefore it is difficult to achieve. From the perspective of most of the traders I spoke to both at the Bolashak and Kitai Bazaars, trade absorbs skilled professionals, among them university graduates, who would not be able to find appropriate, equally lucrative jobs elsewhere, in particular in the state-budgeted sector. Bazaar traders employing additional staff thus conceive themselves in a position of taking over responsibilities of state institutions, and by so doing, challenge the very authority and accountability of the state. Female traders like Marzhan, who form the majority of traders even in the wholesale segment, play an important role in this process. This ties in with Bruno's observations of the gendered nature of post-Soviet trade, both in terms of women being pushed into the bazaar economy in absence of employment alternatives since the end of socialism, as well as being often considered more trustworthy and socially responsible entrepreneurs than their male counterparts (Bruno 1997).

## Renegotiating Exchange

The ongoing large-scale interventions in the immediate borderlands are increasingly perceived as a threat to these socially conducive functions of bazaar trade in public opinions. This is particularly true in the case of the CU between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. The CU is envisioned to generate a competitive advantage for domestic production – by reinforcing its outer borders and preventing ‘black market imports’ from China.<sup>27</sup>

For my interlocutors at Barakholka in Almaty, the new border regime imposed by the CU has been harshly criticized as a hasty step that does not adequately take the realities on the ground into account. In the words of one trader who concisely sums it up: ‘The CU predominantly aims at protecting emerging national production from cheap imports from China. But people are not ready for that’. Another trader, arguing from a critical realist point of view, put it like this:

A country like China, it can export and export and export. And there is no need of reinventing the wheel here and rebuilding domestic industrial production, for sure. [...] Of course we should be happy to have our national producers, but if you can have it cheaper from China... It comes out like that, even with all transport costs.

The implementations of the CU and the tighter regulations that come with it have an even more pronounced effect on Bishkek’s Dordoi Bazaar. ‘No Kazakhstan means no trade’ – such was the cynical formula Rashid used to sum the situation up in a nutshell. He thereby points to his full warehouse container and the absence of his long-standing customers, who used to come here to stock up regularly. Many Dordoi traders like Rashid are forced to switch from wholesale to a combination of wholesale and retail trade with domestic customers from Kyrgyzstan – a much less lucrative business. Some traders and transport providers, however, quickly capitalize on the new rules. Since summer 2011, a new form of ad-hoc ‘shuttle trade’ with all kinds of Chinese-made consumer goods from the Dordoi Bazaar has flourished at several Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan border crossings. Korday, the

27 A recent report by the German development agency GIZ argues that: ‘The possible guess [if Kyrgyzstan finally joined the CU] might be that the centre of trade will be relocated from Kyrgyzstani Dordoi, that will lose its wholesale traders, to Kazakhstan’s Khorgos’ (GIZ 2011: 34). The reasons for this, according to the report, are visa-free travel and preferential tariffs at the ICBC in Khorgos. In other words, if the ICBC can live up to its promise, the existing ‘tax-free’ contraband channels would face competition from an equally tax-free legal one.

main crossing between Bishkek and Almaty was at times almost impassable. Azhar outlined what was going on:

At Dordoi, additional mechanical pressing facilities were installed to bale enormous packs of textiles into transportable cubes. [...] At Korday, too, a new category of service appeared: the shuttle porter. Hundreds of local people are employed by traders for some US\$20 a day to carry bales of merchandise across, sometimes several times a day, back and forth, one after another. An enormous crowd queues up in the heat every day, pushing each other around [...] The Kazakhstani custom officers are just preying on them, taking bribes from everyone or randomly confiscating the goods.

This novel type of shuttle trade, specially confined to the immediate border crossing, is facilitated by the CU's legislation that exempts personal belongings of up to 50 kilograms and US\$1,500 from paying duty. In fact, customs officials in charge of enforcing these regulations and fighting 'contraband' can personally profit from this situation by taking bribes in rather blatant ways. For Azhar, all of this means an additional hurdle. The idea of sourcing goods directly from Xinjiang or other parts of China and scaling her business up to the large retail or wholesale level does not appeal to her; nor could she financially afford or have the necessary connections to do so. Trading in larger quantities of goods requires capital and frequent journeys to Urumqi or, even better, to coastal China. Azhar also emphasizes that she is not be able to withstand the fierce competition in wholesale trade. While the scenario of being restricted in her opportunities seems to provide a rather negative outlook, this could change again with the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the CU, which is a matter of intensive debate in Kyrgyzstan (Vecherny Bishkek 2011).<sup>28</sup>

All of this shows that the small-scale trade flows across the borders between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang challenge 'official' border regimes in various ways. Borders are permeable, small trade connections are not static, and the situation is in no way exclusively regulated by the law. It is rather, as Parham (2009) notes in the context of Kyrgyzstan-China and Tajikistan-China borderlands, contextually (re-)negotiated by the actors involved, including Customs officials, traders, and the state's elites with their development agendas. Given the legal loopholes and latent corruption at border crossings, notwithstanding powerful measures of state authorities,

28 Kyrgyzstan has become a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, of which the CU is a central component, in May 2015. The economic effects of this accession for Dordoi's wholesale and retail traders and for the Kyrgyzstani economy in general remain yet to be fully explored.

there is some limited space for bazaar entrepreneurs to manoeuvre within networks of distribution and supply.

## Conclusion

This chapter seeks to provide in-depth and multilevel observations of 'neighbouring' in the world of trans-border trade in the border zones of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang. The cases of traders at the Bolashak and Kitai Bazaars in Almaty and Bishkek as nodes of the larger wholesale and retail networks show that such an approach matters for the analysis not only of mere supply and distribution chains, but also of more general social transformations. This process of change interrelates with the capability of small traders to position themselves favourably and anticipate future change (Alff, 2014).

First and foremost, trade patterns are bound to socio-economic networks across the borderlands that can, but not necessarily do, generate spatial and social mobility. Marzhan's close ties to partners in coastal China on the one hand, and ethnic ties as emphasized by Azhar and Rashid on the other hand, are often mobilized as vital resources. Along with financial capital, this social capital is considered a central precondition for entrepreneurial success. From the perspective of bazaar entrepreneurs, 'the art of neighbouring' implies a good amount of resourcefulness that is necessary to make use of China's rise. Trust, socio-cultural sensitivity, social responsibility, and the morality regarding access to consumption that is increasingly accepted in the wider society, are all part of the story. As illustrated by Marzhan and Adil's case of wholesale business, rather positive representations of trans-border trade have started replacing the still widespread and deeply-rooted public perceptions of trade as unsophisticated and immoral labour. This change in attitude and significant economic success of large wholesale business contributes to a certain upward social mobility. However, the constant negotiation of power asymmetries between wholesale and retail entrepreneurs and state authorities continues to imply vulnerability and risk.

This uncertainty is, on the one hand, amplified by the outcomes of modernization efforts that dominate the public discourse. These outcomes condition and enact network-based trade patterns. Economic modernization in Xinjiang has opened up channels for supply with cheap consumer goods. Bazaar entrepreneurs in Almaty and Bishkek also constantly change their supply strategies to adapt to new and changing rules, particularly at border crossings and often in ways that are contradictory to the intended goals of

state policies. Thus, in accordance with Itty Abraham's observation, 'the borderland is a zone where privately produced social order and formal political rules are in a constant state of uncertainty and conflict (Abraham 2006: 4)

Linking the macro-level of modernization schemes with the micro-level of supply and distribution strategies, it becomes clear that bazaar entrepreneurs, on the one hand, are forced to adapt to changing regulations and their implementation to a certain degree, both locally and translocally. However, socio-economic networks are also utilized in evasion of official rules to ensure constant supply and, thereby, to minimize risks. Marzhan's employment of a broker in Khorgos can be predominantly characterized as reactive. On the other hand, supply and delivery patterns have turned out to be rather proactive. Bazaar entrepreneurs, for example, find loopholes to avoid restrictions imposed on them at borders. These strategies, adopted to bypass rules, are however far from being universally applicable and can lead to new barriers for commercial mobility and network-related flows, as Azhar's case of becoming restricted to local supplies illustrates.

With regard to the neighbouring situation, the chapter has shown that the locus of neighbouring in the last two decades has shifted from the immediate borderlands (Baud and van Schendel 1997: 222) to urban nodes of wholesale trade, and as of late, partly back to the border. This shows the scalar elasticity or fluidity of the neighbouring situation. Neighbouring has become qualitatively different from the early 1990s, and it operates across long distances due to socio-political change. With these dynamics, a relatively broad, relational definition of borderlands, orientated at nodes in social networks between hub bazaars and distribution centres in Almaty, Bishkek and across China, seems necessary. Moreover, it must be also stressed that networks can reach far beyond the immediate borderlands and thus require a geographically unbounded approach beyond the concept of neighbouring in proximity. I agree with Parham that it is necessary to remain wary of concepts of static or bounded borderlands and attention has to be paid to how they are experienced and negotiated in everyday life in a myriad of ways and scopes (Parham 2009: 16). Going beyond the much-debated conceptualization of borders as delineated structures to enforce state power to a given state territory, borderlands are to be understood as contextually changing (and changeable) social constructs. They are framed and transcended by power relations and negotiation processes among actors involved. Thus, 'the art of neighbouring' in China's borderlands with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan implies unexpected alliances and confrontations across scales and places. It requires resistance and adaptability and has considerable effects on individual livelihoods as well as local and state economies.





# 5 A World Community of Neighbours in the Making

Resource Cosmopolitics and Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour' Diplomacy

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## Introduction: Mongolia's Third Neighbour Policy

The late 1980s was a momentous period in world history, and like many countries in the world, Mongolia was caught up in it.<sup>1</sup> The country's pro-democracy movement, which rose in momentum in the same period, was simultaneously an anti-Soviet colonial liberation movement, as it denounced Soviet exploitation, colonization and even genocide in the late 1930s. Meanwhile, the Sino-Soviet détente was accompanied by the Soviet withdrawal of troops from Mongolia (Radchenko 2012), a rapid waning of the Soviet power, and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991. Thereupon Mongolia lost its traditional guarantor of independence as much as it rejected it. What it meant for the new democracy was that it was left to face China alone, a historical nemesis, and a communist state that had just used its military power to crush its student movement in Beijing and the Tibetan rebellion in 1989. As Inner Mongols from China flooded into Mongolia, the sinicized demeanour and speech, perceived or real, of some of the visitors horrified the Mongols in Mongolia, serving as a mirror for the Mongols to see what a Chinese colonization might look like (Bulag 1998). They developed a profound sense of insecurity; Mongols were paranoid that an impoverished Russia might sell Mongolia to China, something called for by ultra-rightist nationalists such as Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's fall in fortune galvanized Mongolia to reshape its foreign policy as a matter of national survival.

In June 1990, a month after the Mongolian People's Republic amended its Constitution to legalize opposition parties and scheduled a multi-party

\* My thanks to the editors for invitation to 'The Art of Neighbouring: Old Crossroads and New Connections along the PRC's Borders' they organized at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore.

1 Mongolia was known as the Mongolian People's Republic from 1924 to 1992.

election, the United States sent its first residential ambassador, and on August 2, 1990, less than a month after the election, the US Secretary of State James A. Baker, III came to visit Mongolia and addressed the new Mongolian parliament to bolster this young democracy. He reportedly told the Mongolians to the effect that 'Mongolia has two good neighbours, but if needed a third, the US would be happy to be it' (Campi 2005: 48). The United States then led the way in supporting Mongolia's transition, rallying democratic countries to provide economic assistance (Addleton 2013).

The United States' neighbourly posture to Mongolia was, no doubt, designed to replace the collapsing Soviet Union, and help Mongolia to balance China's growing economic and political influence. As Munkh-Ochir Dorjjugder writes, 'A rhetorical gesture to support the nation's first move toward democracy [...], it meant more to Mongolians than to any American present at the speech. The idea, possibly quickly forgotten in Washington, was immediately picked up by the Mongolian elite' (Dorjjugder 2011). Although the Mongolians were deeply encouraged and inspired by James Baker's proposal, and began to seek 'third neighbours' among democratic and economically advanced nations, according to Alicia Campi, the US did not initially appear to be willing to be committed to its own promise:

As former Mongolian Minister of Foreign Affairs, L. Erdenechuluun wrote: 'To many Mongolian politicians and government officials, the US would appear as the savior of new Mongolia and "major pillar" of its national security'. However, at first, American officials dismissed the Third Neighbour concept as a non-starter, because they viewed Mongolia as a friendly, but minor nation wedged between significant American rivals, Russia and the PRC. (Campi 2010: 90).

The initial non-committal stance of the US was a reminder to Mongolia that the virtual non-territorial 'third neighbours' could never be a physical deterrent to any Chinese or Russian aggression. Thus, in the National Security Concept developed in 1994, Mongolia moved away from its classical approach of 'hard balancing' or relying on a friend against an enemy. It declared that Mongolia's foreign policy would be based on political realism, nonalignment, pursuit of national interest, and participation in international efforts to strengthen international peace and security. Responding to the changed geopolitical condition of Mongolia, and repositioning itself as a 'small state', Mongolia began to treat China and Russia as equal neighbours, hoping to keep them at equal distance while

improving relations with them simultaneously. Formulated as neighbours, Mongolia no longer treats them as friend or enemy, so that Mongolia's new post-socialist foreign policy is officially not to antagonize either, still less both. Importantly, Mongolia revived the 1930s' idea of building a neutral state, as advanced by the Buryat Mongolian scholar Tseveen Jamtsarano. This is best manifested in the declaration of Mongolia's territory to be a 'nuclear-weapon-free zone' made by President P. Ochirbat to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1992. It was a solemn pledge that Mongolia would not take sides with either of its neighbours or allow its territory to be used against the other as happened in the 1960s to the end of the 1980s when Mongolia was a host to a number of Soviet military bases with nuclear weapons.<sup>2</sup>

After more than a decade of active experiment, Mongolia formally enshrined its Third Neighbour policy in the renewed National Security Concepts of Mongolia passed in June 2010. More than any other nations in the world, the concept of 'neighbour' has come to occupy the core in Mongolia's conceptualization of its place in the world. In this new policy, Mongolia pivots its national sovereignty not only on treating China and Russia as neighbours, keeping them at equal distance, but more importantly on the so-called 'third neighbours', a conglomeration of democracies plus a few select friendly non-democracies. These 'third neighbours', of which the US, the EU, and Japan being the most important, are all territorially non-contiguous with Mongolia, either by land or by sea.

This chapter is an attempt to understand Mongolia's Third Neighbour approach as its new art of neighbouring. Mongolia's new foreign policy has been primarily for defensive purpose, to use the Third Neighbours to offset any aggression from either of its territorial neighbours, especially China. Yet, declaring itself a neutral state, pursuing a policy of nonalignment, how not to use or not to be used by the 'third neighbours' against China or Russia demands Mongolia to exercise its 'smart power', as it were. The key to this art of neighbouring lies in how to avoid the political in the profound political solution to maintenance of Mongolia's sovereignty.

2 The Parliament of Mongolia on February 3, 2000 passed the 'Law of Mongolia on its nuclear-weapon-free status', and on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the Permanent Representatives to the United Nations of the five Nuclear Weapon States (NWS) – the US, Russia, China, United Kingdom and France – and the Permanent Representative of Mongolia to the United Nations signed parallel political declarations regarding Mongolia's nuclear-weapon-free status (Nuclear Threat Initiative 2013). See also Defense Treaty Inspection Readiness Program (2010) for the comprehensive review of Mongolia's negotiation for a nuclear-weapon-free status.

## Fortunate Neighbours, Unfortunate Neighbours

Neighbour is a key metaphor in Christian moral philosophy, which has recently been taken on board to imagine a cosmopolitan world in which people are urged to treat immigrants, strangers, and other non-natives as neighbours whom we are obliged to love: 'love thy neighbour!' (Derrida 2004). The central attraction of neighbour lies in the idea of proximity which is expected to overcome enmity. However, paradoxically, neighbourly proximity is both an end and a means, for the concept of neighbour can be instrumentalized to serve a political purpose. The US 'Good Neighbour' policy was a prime example of the strategic use for assembling alliances, as it was designed to promote non-intervention and friendship with its southerly neighbours, and to secure Latin American support against the looming threat posed by Germany in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

The People's Republic of China has, since the 1950s, adopted a similar good neighbourly policy; inspired by the American model, but also rooted in traditional metaphor of neighbours being as close as lips and teeth (*chunchi xiangyi* 唇齿相依), it has been used to put moral injunction on China's neighbouring countries, emphasizing common interest (Lin 2005). In 2003, China broadened the scope of its good neighbour policy, pledging to promote an 'amicable, peaceful, and prosperous neighbourhood' at the same time proclaiming China's 'peaceful rise'. The two extra dimensions to the original idea of good neighbour (*mu lin* 睦邻) – peaceful neighbour (*an lin* 安邻) and rich neighbour (*fu lin* 富邻) (Yang 2004) – are no doubt designed to enhance China's own prestige by placating China's neighbours (Tsai et al. 2011).

The moral conception of proximate neighbourhood, I argue, is imbedded in sedentary metaphysics as exemplified in the wise saying: 'You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your neighbours'. The trouble is, as Slavoj Žižek (2005) shows, hatred and killing often occur between close neighbours. In Bosnia, the concept of neighbourhood called *koms'uluk* has become ambivalent, as it is torn between culturally expected intimate sociality and the murderous tensions among people in the same neighbourhood divided along ethnic lines (Bringa 1993, Henig 2012, Sorabji 2008). One may argue that proximity does not necessarily always lead to friendship; rather,

3 In order to assuage the fears of Latin Americans, on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1933, Roosevelt announced in his inaugural address that: 'In the field of World policy, I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbour, the neighbour who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others, the neighbour who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbours' (Roosevelt 1933).

precisely because of overlapping interests, maintaining a boundary between neighbours may be difficult but existentially essential. As Jacques-Alain Miller writes perceptively, 'For it is a simple matter to love one's neighbour when he is distant, but it is a different matter in proximity' (Miller 1994: 79-80).

Conceptualized this way, geopolitics of neighbourhood can be the defining characteristic of a nation's foreign relations. Dana Cuff, in writing about the figure of the neighbour in suburban America, notes that the neighbour is both spatial and social. It is also 'political' in the sense of Carl Schmitt, which requires our wisdom to make a good distinction between a good and a bad neighbour (Cuff 2005, Schmitt 1996 [1932]). If we follow Mao Zedong, then, choosing to live with the right neighbour against the bad neighbour might be seen as the answer to one's survival and well-being.<sup>4</sup> As shown by Mongolia's conceptualization of China and Russia as equal neighbours (so as to avoid conflicts) and those beyond as third neighbours (to 'soft-balance' the first two neighbours), the figure of neighbour has a built-in paradox of both the political and the anti-political. It may be both the problem and the solution to it.

Mongolia's third neighbour conceptualization, as I will analyze below, shows that peaceful coexistence of peoples and countries as neighbours lies as much in moral injunction as in having a freedom to choose neighbours, thereby reassembling a new neighbourhood. To the extent that Mongolia actively invites a cluster of nations and international institutions into Mongolia as third neighbours to flank the two territorial neighbours, we are witnessing a radical geopolitical reconfiguration of Inner Asia, transforming Mongolia from a hermit state landlocked between two mutually exclusive rival superpowers, to a nation sitting at the centre of a world community of neighbours in the making. This is in large part a product of Mongolia's own diplomatic initiatives.

The Mongolian approach may be best explained by Bruno Latour's sociology of translation, in which the aggregation of groups is the target of explanation, as opposed to what he calls sociology of the social which takes groups as a starting point (Latour 2005). As such, what we need to do is to explain how Mongolia has tried to reassemble a new omni-neighbourhood in Mongolia, whether a new cosmo-polity is emerging in Mongolia, and what characteristics it may have.

Latour's sociology of translation suggests that an association or group is not always comprised only of humans. Non-humans can also play an

4 'Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution. The basic reason why all previous revolutionary struggles in China achieved so little was their failure to unite with real friends in order to attack real enemies' (Mao 1925: 249).

equal role, exercising agency. I think it is an important insight useful for understanding the formation of new neighbourhood in Mongolia, but we must at the same time reject Latour's flat ontology. For not all things have the same weight in their exercise of agency, nor do people have equal power or status. Context, history, and culture determine the shape, duration, and meaningfulness that each association or neighbourhood takes.

Giovanni da Col (2012), in a recent article in which he develops a concept of cosmoeconomics, argues that Tibetan cultural and social life is centred on fortune, or *yang*, and managing one's fortune is 'the elementary form of fortunate life (da Col 2012: 192). Fortune is the vital force of either an individual or a group, but it is perforce to be shared: 'Good fortune has to be shared and redistributed properly and is the medium that connects, shapes, and re-creates social networks through the economies it entails. But it requires constant care to avoid free-riders and parasites' (da Col 2012: 192). Put differently, too much fortune may, like a piece of rotten meat, attract a lot of flies, making you unfortunate. I build on this argument and suggest that fortune and its sharing or unsharing may lead to regrouping and formations of new political associations.

While da Col's fortune is something invisible, unquantifiable, and yet has a 'quasi-relational materiality' as it can be preserved, contained, or appropriated, and it can flee or disappear of its own volition due to external influence, and such as it is a generalized fortune, I would like to focus on something specific to locality that may contain the fortune that makes the people of the locality particularly fortunate and prosperous, and yet precisely because of this quality it is subject to desire from outsiders. I call it the fortune-sovereignty of the people inhabiting the territory. My conception of fortune-sovereignty goes beyond the Eurocentric and modernist understanding of sovereignty as something exclusive with a bounded essence; fortune-sovereignty not only posits relationality, often hierarchical and overlapping, but involves exchanges of fortunes between various sovereign realms that result in regional dynamics.<sup>5</sup> The best term that captures this sense of fortune-sovereignty is the Chinese concept of *fangwu* (万物) which refers to things specific to a region. *Fangwu*, in Chinese conception, is both cosmoeconomic and cosmopolitical.

5 Aihwa Ong has recently put forward a similar concept of 'graduated sovereignty' to understand the distributed, non-exclusive characteristics of East Asian state sovereign power between the centre and special economic zones, where the citizenship is defined differently according to race, ethnicity, gender, class and region, and where foreign corporations are allowed in to exercise certain authority (Ong 2006).

Take for example the classical Chinese schema of *tianxia* (天下). It is a five or nine concentric circle of peoples whose degree of humanity or civilization is measured by a gradation of distance from the centre.<sup>6</sup> It is in practice a combination of political authority and economic fortune; that is, the prestige and authority of the centre must be sustained by tribute bearing from the periphery. The tributary items – *fangwu* – from the periphery are not just symbolic, but represent the fortune-sovereignty of the realm; in return the peripheral leaders get more value-added goods as gifts, i.e. the fortune-sovereignty from the emperor's realm, but political subordination to the supreme authority of the centre. James Hevia comes close to capturing the essence of the cosmopolitics of this fortune-sovereignty:

[T]ribute is glossed in Chinese-language sources as local products (*fangwu*), that is, things specific to the kingdom of the ruler who presented them to the emperor. The emperor, in turn, bestowed things from his kingdom on the other ruler. This exchange of precious objects was understood to forge a political relationship between the Qing emperor, as the superior, and the other ruler, as inferior, the purpose of which was nothing less than the mutual undertaking of the cosmic-moral ordering of the world. The objects themselves and their specific movements, I would argue, cannot be reduced purely to economic or cultural values. Rather, they are performative gestures in that they had a role in producing political and even natural relations. (Hevia 2003: 15-16)<sup>7</sup>

6 The Chinese classic *Rites of Zhou* ranked nine domains of imperial administration starting from the residence of the ruler, with required service specified in the tributary relations: (The ruler) distinguished between the nine domains or areas of service (*fu* 服) among the vassal states. The area covering one thousand *li* (from the emperor) is called the Royal Capital Domain (*Wangji* 王畿). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Royal Capital Domain is the area called the Marquis Area of Service (*Houfu* 侯服). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Marquis Area of Service is the area called the Master of the Hinterland Area of Service (*Dianfu* 甸服). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Master of the Hinterland Area of Service is the area called the Baron Area of Service (*Nanfu* 男服). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Baron Area of Service is the area called the Pledged Official Area of Service (*Caifu* 采服). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Pledged Official Area of Service is the area called the Guard Area of Service (*Weifu* 卫服). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Guard Area of Service is the area called the Man Barbarian Official Area of Service (*Manfu* 蛮服). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Man Barbarian Official Area of Service is the area called the Yi Barbarian Official Area of Service (*Yifu* 夷服). The area five hundred *li* beyond the Yi Barbarian Official Area of Service is the area called Defense Commander Area of Service (*Zhenfu* 镇服). Lastly, the area five hundred *li* beyond the Defense Commander Area of Service is the Barbarian Border Official Area of Service (*Fanfu* 藩服) (Quoted in Anderson 2007: 22).

7 See also Hevia (1995: 128-130).



This schema is predicated on the abundance of China's fortune-sovereignty, a vital force that China often had to share with non-Chinese peoples, albeit in attempted exchange for the latter's political loyalty and subordination. This sharing of the fortune-sovereignty was often a dangerous undertaking, for often the peripheral peoples would attempt to conquer and occupy China in part or in whole, turning China's 'cherished men from afar' into 'perilous neighbours' (Barfield 1989). The history of China oscillates between these two sets of dynamics: on the one hand, the Chinese imperial imperative determines centripetalism, as its centrality must be sustained by tribute-bearing from the periphery, which must be beckoned and cherished. On the other hand, it builds up walls to protect itself from so-called 'greedy' nomadic neighbours (di Cosmo 1994) whose tribute-making became a way to exploit China, as they tried to wrestle more in the missions. There were times when peripheral leaders were told not to come to pay tribute, and China engaged in active defence by building walls, or expelling 'barbarians'. What it implies is that, I argue, China's fortune-sovereignty – its specific material abundance – had the potential to become the source of its misfortune, the aversion of which requiring astute management. The management of fortune-sovereignty is the elementary form of the Chinese cosmopolitics.

The geoeconomic and cosmopolitical perspectives as outlined above can perhaps explain Mongolia's transformation from a conquest people to one looking inward to defend themselves. I argue that it was this transformation that brought China to become Mongolia's 'perilous neighbour', and making Mongolia lose its own capacity to be China's worthy neighbour. In other words, I suggest that a neighbour is not an individual or group that is territorially close to someone fortuitously. To be a neighbour is to be oriented to someone's fortune-sovereignty, thereby becoming a force to be reckoned with.

What, then, is the fortune-sovereignty of Mongolia? I have elsewhere argued that during the Qing era, the Mongols were largely kept separate from the Chinese with the Great Wall and the Willow Palisade serving as their borders. The Mongols' nationalist involution was therefore the product of the Qing management of the Mongols, who were given a sense of territorial boundary, which they were to defend (Bulag 2012b). Moreover, the Mongols were given to develop a sense that their land was rich, as there emerged a plethora of place names with the word '*bayan*', wealthy or rich: *bayangol*, *bayanhot*, *bayanbogd*, *bayantsagaan*, *bayanhongor*. Like the Tibetans, Mongols began to think in terms of fortune, *heshig*, which is located in pastures, mountains or rivers or lakes (for studies of Mongol practice of beckoning or increasing one's fortune, see Chabros [1992],

Empson [2011], Humphrey and Ujeed [2012]). Mongols began to think that they were the most 'fortunate' and 'blessed' people in the world in terms of their material well-being. This was no doubt the product of the Qing policy of territorialization of the Mongol banners, their princes being obliged to regularly worship mountains and rivers which were believed to be fortune-providers (Ts. Nasanbaljir 1964).

Such cosmoeconomic transformation had direct bearing on the Mongolian cosmopolitical configuration. In the late nineteenth century, there emerged legends about golden horses or golden cattle, which, once grazing on luscious pastures or swimming under lakes, are either stolen by southern barbarians (*nanmanzi* 南蛮子) or Chinese, and occasionally Russians, or running away, startled by the strangers. These legends tell of the massive arrival of the Chinese and Russian settlers in Mongolia, and Mongol heroic defence of their pasture and salt lakes (Bulag 2010: 167-197, Chen 2001). Such legends of loss of fortune-wealth show an irony of Mongolia's misfortune stemming precisely from their rich endowment of natural resources, and the Chinese and others turning from a victim fleeing Mongols to ones settling in Mongolia and among the Mongols as aggressive neighbours.

Whether or how to share Mongolia's fortune-sovereignty with non-Mongols thus became an existential question for Mongols at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I argue that the 20<sup>th</sup> century Mongolian independence must be understood in this new cosmopolitical and cosmoeconomic context, which constituted a structure of opportunity, an opportunity for Mongolia to exercise its agency to form its own polity. By structure of opportunity I mean that these expansive powers were all mutually exclusive, all wanting to encompass Mongolia into their own polity, either formally or informally. I have recently developed a concept called 'collaborative nationalism' to capture the characteristics and dynamics of Mongolian nationalism (Bulag 2010). Mongol nationalism, that is a desire to build a nation-state on historical Mongolia, was waged through bringing in and forming a united front with a third party against a major adversary. In triangulating the relationship, the Mongols developed agential capacity to judge and decide how to use their fortune both to cut networks and build new ones.

My point of collaborative nationalism is that nationalism is not always a practice of bowling alone, to use Robert D. Putnam's (2008) apt phrase, but is often collaborative with putative friends against putative enemies, and the biggest challenge to collaborative nationalism is how to manage the shared fortune-sovereignty with the friends in the absence of the enemies after they are defeated. Indeed, in the twentieth century, Mongols suffered more in the hands of their Soviet Russian friends than their enemies,

Chinese or Japanese. Most of Mongolia's leaders were killed by the Soviet Russians. The Soviet Union stationed a massive army in the 1930s and 40s, and from 1966 to 1991, and operated secret uranium mines and railways. This friendship was both necessary and hugely costly, and it was even colonial, not because of the inherent evilness of the Russians, but because of the strategic necessity of collaborative nationalism. Mongols have to share their fortune-sovereignty with a friend in order to avoid the possibility of its complete loss in the hands of an adversary, who was perceived to represent 'threat', rather than simply 'power', according to the 'balance of threat' theory proposed by Stephen Walt (1985).

Since the 1920s, Mongolian politicians have been attracted to the Switzerland model to maintain neutrality, but this has never been a real option. From the early sixties, landlocked, exploited by the Soviet Union, and yet deeply suspicious of China, Mongolia embarked on a road to internationalize itself by joining the UN and establishing diplomatic relations with as many countries as possible (Altangerel et al. 2013, Campi and Baasan 2009): another round of collaborative nationalism.

As is clear, Mongolian collaborative nationalism is not just relational, but also organizational, as it aims to form partnerships, and it is as strategic as it is flexible, depending on the Mongol judgment of the fluctuating qualities of its territorial and non-territorial neighbours, such as their aggregate strength, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions. One may argue that flexibility is not necessarily a monopolistic property of late capitalist accumulation as David Harvey (1989: 141-172), or Chinese negotiation with global capitalism in the face of political uncertainty as Aihwa Ong (1999) would have it. Flexibility is in fact a distinct feature of Mongolian territoriality, and it is the traditional mechanism to maintain peace or wage warfare.

Consider the rural Mongolian residential pattern. The smallest residential community in Mongolia is called *hot ail*. This is a partnership community with several families congregating to share labour and pasture, forming a neighbourhood, called after the shared fortune or property: *neg usniihan*, people of one water source; *neg goliinhan*, people of one river, and so on. The members could be relatives or friends, and the size of the community could be constant, as some families move in or out, depending on how they get along. The flexibility or possibility of moving away from the neighbourhood means Mongols have freedom to decide whom to choose to live next to. To be sure, there are as many impossibilities as there are flexibilities, but my general point is that Mongols do have a tradition of not only choosing a neighbour or neighbours, but also forming a neighbourhood or an

aggregation based on common interest. I call this flexible neighbourhood. Mongols do not bowl alone, but form alignment to confront an adversary or venture for a fortune.

My concept of flexible neighbourhood has the advantage of capturing not only the flexible form and size of neighbourhood, but also the agencies of actors. To be a member of a neighbourhood, or to rally familial units to form a community, one has to have sufficient capital, social or economic, and they constitute complementarities thereby achieving an organic unity, to use Durkheim's phrase. This flexibility characterizes social dynamics in Mongolian history, especially from the twelfth century to the eighteenth century. The Manchu tried to destroy this flexibility mechanism by dividing up Mongols along banner lines, but within a banner, flexibility continued. The new spirit of flexibility is precisely how to work against the fixed territorial grain to form a flexible neighbourhood of nation-states in the world.

Following the cosmoeconomic-cum-cosmopolitical perspectives and that of flexible neighbourhood, I suggest that today, as Mongolia discovers world class mines of coal, copper, and gold – the fortune or the source of energy vital for Mongolia's economic rise – a new round of neighbouring is now taking place. The proximity of these mines, many of which have been declared 'strategic deposits' by the Mongolian government in 2007, to the Chinese border, and the fact that China is the largest market for these minerals, as China needs these resources to energize its own economy, all point to the fact that Mongolia's fortune-sovereignty will have to be shared with China as a 'greedy' neighbour. How to share this fortune-sovereignty has become a question of how to keep Mongolia fortunate; it is also indicative of Mongolia's art of neighbouring.

### **Reassembling Neighbours in Mine-golia**

In spring 1990, Mongolia became the first Asian communist country that embraced democracy. Quickly Mongolia's career diplomats, now wearing a hat of democracy, went out on a new mission; democracy, as an ideological resource, did its magic as an 'actant' not only to allow Mongolia to join the international community of democracies but also bring them in to form Mongolia's new flexible neighbourhood. Mongolia's strategy paid off, as the US led a group of donor countries to provide Overseas Development Assistance to Mongolia.

With China being defined as a neighbour, after normalizing relations in 1989, Mongolia opened its door for Chinese investment to compensate for

the withdrawal of Russian investment. Much of the Chinese capital went into small coal mines in Mongolia as Mongolia issued thousands of licenses, almost for free, in a bid to attract foreign investment. However, for much of the 1990s, despite the in-flow of foreign aid, Mongolia languished in poverty, due no small part to, *inter alia*, the international reputation Mongolia enjoyed as a country of pastoral economy, collapse of infrastructure, and shortage of skilled labour.

This situation began to improve at the turn of the new millennium, when the Canadian company Ivanhoe Mines discovered world class gold-copper ore deposits in a place called Oyu Tolgoi, or *Turquoise Hill* in the Gobi Desert, only 80 kilometres from the Chinese border. As more world-class mineral deposits were discovered, and international investment poured in, the Mongolian government decided to exploit the mine together with Ivanhoe and the Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto exclusively. In 2009 they agreed on a 34 percent Mongolian government and 66 percent Ivanhoe and Rio Tinto investment deal.

Ivanhoe and Rio Tinto's entry into Mongolia quickly transformed Mongolia into Mine-golia (Bulag 2009), as minerals have been recognized as the nation's new fortune-property to make it prosperous. However, the Mongolian government's willingness to allow 66 percent share control by Ivanhoe and Rio Tinto happened at a time of heightened nationalist anxiety over China's massive investment in Mongolia. There was a rising anti-China sentiment against its perceived threat to Mongolia's national security (Rossabi 2005). I argue that Mongolia's deal on Oyu Tolgoi followed the logic of 'collaborative nationalism', that is to bring in powerful international companies from Mongolia's 'third neighbours' to 'balance' China's preponderance of investment in small mines, and Russian control of Mongolia's large copper mine of Erdenet. In doing so, Mongolia enacted a political expectation of Ivanhoe and Rio Tinto to be different from Chinese companies or Russian companies. In other words, the Mongols expected corporations from the 'third neighbours' to demonstrate altruism to Mongolia.

In 2010, Mongolia renewed its 1994 National Security Concept. According to Reeves, the renewal was a culmination of gradual shift from an omnimeshment strategy to one of combining omnimeshment with balance of influence, identifying China as Mongolia's biggest national security concern (Reeves 2012). I would add that the new National Security Concept has elevated the 'Third Neighbours' to the same level as the two territorial neighbours, while avoiding a political naivety enshrined in the previous conception. Mongolia's resource nationalistic stance towards Rio Tinto as shown in the recent calls for renegotiating the deal represents a belated

realization that the 'Third Neighbours' may have their own self-interest in investment into Mongolia's vital mineral sectors.

One clause in the new National Security Concept is particularly striking: 'External factors which may adversely affect the ensuring of economic security: Direct dependence on any one country in economic branches of strategic importance' (Embassy of Mongolia n.d., Chapter 5, article 33). This clause is usually interpreted as a 'one third' rule, i.e. a proportional and equal representation of the three neighbours' economic interest in Mongolia. The rule is thus an indication as much to curb China's domination in Mongolia as a realization of the limited power and indeed the self-interest of the third neighbours who may strike better deals with China or Russia to the detriment of Mongolia's national interest, or fall afoul of Mongolia's two territorial neighbours. In 2010 Mongolia put Tavan Tolgoi, the world's second largest coking coal deposit, to international bidding, not limited to the 'third neighbours' alone. Indeed, 'third neighbours' were to be just that, 'one third' in Mongolia's three-member neighbourhood. In Mongolia's new strategic thinking, the three neighbours must be brought in to achieve some kind of equilibrium on which Mongolia's national sovereignty will rest.

In 2009, shortly before the bidding, three of Russia's highest leaders visited Mongolia in succession: the Prime Minister Putin in May, President Medvedev in August, and Speaker of the Upper House, Sergei Mironov, in September. In June 2010, the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao visited Mongolia. 2011 saw an unprecedented number of foreign dignitaries: the President of India, Pratiba Davisingh Patil in July, South Korean president Lee Myung-bak and US vice president Joe Biden in August, Finnish President Halonen August 31<sup>st</sup> – September 1<sup>st</sup>, German Chancellor Merkel in mid-October, Austrian president Fischer in December, all coming with impressive packages of offers, all expressing interest in getting a share of Mongolia's strategic fortune-sovereignty – coking coal.

As Mongolian politicians calculated correctly, suddenly Mongolia became a major destination for world leaders, as many of them have taken up on the Mongolian coal rush. The Mongolian government's strategy of assembling a world community of neighbours through its one-third rule can be gauged in its choice of the international bidders for the Tavan Tolgoi Mine in 2011: China's Shenhua was given 40 percent, America's Peabody 24 percent and a Russia-Mongolia consortium 36 percent. More interestingly, apart from America's Peabody, the other two entities were not singles, but each being a consortium itself: The Russian-led consortium included South Korea's POSCO, utility firm KEPCO, trading firm LG Corp and Daewoo International, state-owned Russian Railways and Japanese trading houses

Itochu Corp, Sumitomo Corp, Marubeni Corp and Sojitz Corp. China's consortium comprised China's Shenhua and Japan's Mitsui & Co. This was an omni-enmeshment plus interlocking of interests indeed. Surprisingly, the Mongolian National Security Council vetoed the deal immediately after other South Korean and Japanese bidders cried foul. The rejection was not so much a negation of the intention of balancing as a collision between rigidity of the new security concept and the pragmatics on the ground. The search for bidders continues at this time of writing.

The Mongolian state's strategy can also be seen in the construction of new railway lines to ship the mineral products to the world markets. As a land-locked nation, Mongolia does not have its own sea port; its nearest port is China's Tianjin. Since both Oyu Tolgoi copper mine and Tavan Tolgoi coal mine are located near the Chinese border, which could be accessed by building a two hundred kilometre long narrow-gauge (1,435mm) railway from the mines to link to the existing Chinese railway network, it has been an option strongly favoured by all the mainstream international experts and financial institutions, including the World Bank and the Asia Development Bank. After prolonged debates, in December 2010, the Mongolian parliament resolved to construct a 1,100 kilometre-long internal wide-gauge (1,520mm) railway line in the first phase, and it was to link to the Trans-Mongolian railway and further east to connect to the Russian railway system and the Russian Far Eastern ports of Vanino or Vostochnii, in order to ship Mongolia's minerals to its two close third neighbours, South Korea and Japan. As Munkh-Ochir, a Mongolian defence strategist writes, 'This decision seems to reflect a cohort of other-than-economic considerations – geopolitical calculations, aspirations for sustainable industrialization, and finally public opinion, which matters as the new electoral cycle unfolds' (Dorjjugder 2010).

Mongolia's national strategy on railway construction was political; as such it seemingly trumped all the economic rationality. It was a reaction to the Chinese government's shutdown of the railway at the Sino-Mongolian port of Erlian in 2002 for several days during the visit of the Dalai Lama to Mongolia, ostensibly for 'technical reasons'. In this light, precisely because of the unpredictability of the Chinese government which often uses its economic muscle for international relations, Mongolia's political decision also has had its economic calculation not to become hostage to China, but always allow for an alternative exit. Yet in line with Mongolia's overall strategy, the railway decision must not be construed as shunning China, for China is and will be Mongolia's largest market. Indeed, Chinese capital is eagerly sought for building the new planned railways. On October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014, after four years of gruelling, and oftentimes debilitating, debates with high

pressure from both China and Russia, the Parliament of Mongolia approved the construction of four railway lines: two railway lines to be linked to the Chinese railway system will use the narrow gauge, and the other two – a line from the Mongolian copper city Erdenet to the Mongolia-Russian border into Tuva, and the planned horizontal line of the Mongolian national railway network from the mineral-rich South Gobi to the east, will use the wide gauge (Parliament of Mongolia 2014).

As can be seen, China is actively invited in, but the proportion of the Chinese share of Mongolia's fortune-sovereignty will be equalized with its other territorial neighbour, Russia. This is exemplary of Mongolia's new strategy of building a world community of neighbours *par excellence*.

It remains to be seen whether Mongolia's neighbourhood strategy will work eventually, but what is clear is that Mongolia's art of neighbouring with China is through assembling as many neighbours as possible, inviting them into Mongolia. This situation is somewhat reminiscent of the Chinese *tianxia* and the tributary system. Like an ancient and wealthy agrarian Chinese empire, a mineral-rich Mongolia is now receiving tribute-like missions from powerful countries, all wanting to make profit out of it. Unlike the Chinese emperor who wanted to capitalize on the tributary missions to enhance his own prestige as the supreme lord of universe, Mongolian leaders' ambition is perhaps more mundane, that is, they want to transform these potential threats into forces that can ultimately guarantee Mongolia's sovereign survival and economic prosperity. This is to be achieved not only through a delicate balancing act, keeping all of them at equal distance or closeness, but also through sharing its fortune-sovereignty with all of them, and finding a mechanism to interlock all of their interests together, rather than pitting them against one another.

### **Cosmoeconomics of 'Horspitality', or How To Be Happy Neighbours?**

On November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005, the US president Bush came to Ulaanbaatar to thank Mongolia for its staunch support for the U.S. war effort in Iraq, and particularly to thank the Mongol soldiers for intercepting suicide bombers at the gate of a US military camp, saving hundreds of US soldiers. 'This visit has historical significance because it proves that Mongolia has a third neighbour', Mongolian president Enkhbayar said as he introduced Bush (The Washington Times 2005). 'America is proud to call you the third neighbour', Bush responded (2005). A better and more appropriate response would



have been ‘America is proud to be your third neighbour’, but never mind Bushisms. This was the first time that the US officially and openly accepted Mongolia’s formula and acknowledged a neighbourly relationship between them, 15 years after James Baker first proposed so to Mongolia. Neighbours in need, neighbours indeed.

In his address to the Mongolian parliament, Bush said he had a second mission, ‘I’m here on an important international mission. Secretary Rumsfeld asked me to check on his horse’ (Bush 2005). He referred to a diplomatic gift horse<sup>8</sup> given to Rumsfeld by the Mongolian Ministry of Defence during his visit just a month prior to Bush’s visit. Instead of taking the horse back to the States, Rumsfeld left it in Mongolia, and it was left in the wild to roam freely. The American press at the time was amused, if not embarrassed, not so much at the seemingly worthless Mongol gift, as at the possible indication of the US desperation to rely on a small and poor nation with a belligerent history of war.

A Mongolian horse, a common species, is certainly far less impressive than some rare species, such as panda, as a diplomatic gift to show one country’s good will (for an in-depth discussion of animal-human neighbourly relations in the Chinese context, see Fiskesjö, this volume). I suspect Mongolian diplomats did a poor job in explaining the real significance of a gift horse apart from emphasizing that the given horse is a pure breed or a champion horse in a national *naadam* competition. Still less did they possibly explain why the horse ought to be kept in Mongolia instead of taking away.

Rumsfeld was not the first to get a Mongolian horse. When the Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu, the first national leader of a democratic country arrived for a visit in early August 1991, the Mongols gave him a horse.<sup>9</sup> Less than two weeks later, when the Chinese president Yang Shangkun came for a visit, Mongols also gave him a horse. Neither of them took away the horses. A more recent American politician to get a horse was the US vice president Biden in 2011.<sup>10</sup> A US journalist called Evan Osnos wrote a piece entitled ‘Equine Diplomacy’ on *The New Yorker*, complaining that the Mongols had even given gift-horses to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Moreover, he claimed that he failed in his self-appointed mission to find Rumsfeld’s horse, writing: ‘As for

8 Rumsfeld named it Montana, after his wife’s home state which resembles Mongolian steppe.

9 He named the horse Kaishun. Kai is from his family name and Shun is from Japanese word Shunme that means fleet horse.

10 Biden named the horse ‘Celtic’, after his Irish origins.

Rumsfeld's horse, I never found him. By the end of my trip, the [Mongolian] defence ministry told me that the horse was back in Khentii province, birthplace of Genghis Khan. I was welcome to keep looking for him in the province, an area the size of Austria' (Osno 2011).<sup>11</sup>

The former Japanese Prime Minister Kaifu was far more gracious in his appreciation of the horse he received. In August 2006, at a ceremony marking the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Chinggis's Great Mongolia in 1206, which I also attended, I heard Kaifu reminiscing how he still checked on his Mongolian horse through the Japanese embassy. In October 2011, the newly appointed Japanese Ambassador Takenori Shimizu to Mongolia paid a courtesy call on Kaifu, and Kaifu started his conversation with his Mongolian horse:

At the time of that visit, I was deeply impressed by a gift horse I received from the then President Punsalmaagiin Ochirbat. That was a prized horse that had won in Naadam (the national sports festival of Mongolia). I heard that in Mongolia, a horse is a really considerable gift. However, although I was very grateful, I had no place to keep the horse if I brought it back to Japan, so I thought it would be very unfortunate for the horse. Therefore, when I returned I just brought back its reins. (Japan News 2011)

He also recalled how he was deeply impressed by the Mongolian 'emotional intelligence':

My visit to Mongolia was the first as Prime Minister of Japan and it was also the first by a leader from the West after democratization, so it was an extremely good thing. When I visited the country again some years later, I was eating a meal at a restaurant when I could hear a horse's cry. As I was wondering what was happening, I saw that Kaishun, my horse, had been brought to me by the people taking care of him. I was once again deeply moved by the consideration for me. I thought that this could truly be called heart-to-heart communication. The people of Mongolia have strong compassion, or perhaps I should say an emotional heart. I think their mentality is similar to that of Japanese people. (Japan News 2011).

11 The latest to get a Mongolian gift horse was the US secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel in April 2014. Helen Cooper, a New York Times journalist covering Hagel's visit, wrote that the American fatigue at receiving equine gifts from Mongolia was largely for logistical reasons. They left their horses back in Mongolia because they wouldn't want American taxpayers to bear the cost of their upkeep (Cooper 2014).

I am not sure that Kaifu really understood Mongolian mentality; what he exhibited was perhaps more of his own mentality. The significance of the gift horse must be examined both historically and in the way Mongols conceptualize the human-animal relationship. Historically, horses were Mongol 'local products' presented to the Qing emperor as an obligatory tribute. In 1655, the Qing granted *zasag* (ruling prince) titles to eight princes of the Khalkha, and demanded that the Khalkha make an annual tribute of one white camel and eight white horses to the Qing emperor. The offering of nine whites was institutionalized in 1691 when the Khalkha finally submitted to the Qing (Bawden 1989 [1968]: 102). Thus, viewed historically, presenting a horse gift is not an innocent, but profoundly cosmopolitical act. In other words, during the Qing dynasty, the Mongol submission was annually expressed by surrendering the fortune-sovereignty in exchange for gifts – the fortune-sovereignty of the emperor – and trade rights.

The practice of presenting a gift horse to a guest and leaving it behind in the wild has a more cosmoeconomic dimension. It is usually the case that the Mongols create a specific relation between a person or family and an animal. In creating this association, this individual animal undergoes a consecration ritual called *seter*, which means henceforth, this particular animal is sanctified, never to be drafted for labour or killed for food (for a brief description of *seter*, see (Hyer and Jagchid 1983: 88-89). In consecrating the animal, it is believed that the fortune of both the owner and his animals of the same species will increase. As Tani writes, hunters and herders 'justify their killing and consumption of animals by prohibiting the slaughter of a special individual held to be responsible for the herds' prosperity' (Tani 1996: 45). Fortune or *heshig* may be present everywhere and among all, but it is through identification through naming and setting free an animal that one secures his or her own individualized fortune. Thus, I would argue that presenting the gift-horse is precisely an act to share Mongolia's fortune-sovereignty with the honoured guest, so that his fortune may also multiply. Presenting a horse and performing the *seter* is indexical to the Mongol sense of fortune and happiness. With the fortune of Rumsfeld and Biden, and that of Kaifu ever accumulating in Mongolia, it is hoped that Mongolia and its third neighbours will not only share Mongolia's fortune-sovereignty, but also share happiness together.

As we have seen, the Japanese Prime Minister had an emotional reunion with his gift horse fifteen years later. Since his retirement from politics in 2009, Kaifu has been serving as President of the Japan Mongolia Cross Link Association. In October 2011, Rumsfeld also came back to Mongolia, to 'thank the country for their outsized contributions to the US-led Global

War on Terror and to promote stronger ties between the US and Mongolia' (American Chamber of Commerce in Mongolia 2011). During the occasion, the Mongols brought back his Montana from the steppe for a reunion with his master (Rumsfeld Office 2011). It is said that the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev took away his Mongolian gift horse immediately, so it was probably never consecrated with a *seter*. As for the Chinese president Yang Shangkun's horse, it was kept in Mongolia until 2002 when it was sent to China, four years after Yang's death. A neighbour that shares fortune-sovereignty, but refuses or does not know how to share happiness, is inherently unfortunate.

### Smart Power and Pax-Mongolica in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

I have so far discussed the geopolitical reconfiguration of neighbourhood between Mongolia and China through changing fortune; the reverse of fortune has turned China from a passive neighbour to an active neighbour, from a neighbour that repeatedly tried to wall itself against invaders or expel the conquerors to one that began to actively expand into Mongolia. The closing in of external powers in addition to China as a result of the reverse of Mongolia's fortune, created a situation not entirely unfavourable to Mongolia, however. To the extent that Mongolia's neighbourhood building aims to create a new security structure so that Mongolia's economic prosperity and national sovereignty are guaranteed, we need to examine what measures Mongolia has taken towards that end. Indeed, Mongolia's geopolitical environment is unadmirable. With a border of 4,710 kilometres with China, but less than 20,000 troops in total, China could occupy Mongolia within a day if it wanted to. Mongolia has every good reason to fear a rising China, not least because, for the greater part of their interactive history, China had suffered in the hands of the Mongols repeated loss of territory, people and even death of state (*wang guo* 亡國). It is now the turn of the Mongols to fear the worst, for there is still a powerful undercurrent in China to regard Mongolia as a breakaway territory by virtue of China's claim to be a successor state to the Qing Empire, of which Mongolia was once an important part (Bulag 2012a). In this regard, then, 'China threat' is not something entirely new, and an assertive China is, to Mongolia, not a sudden change from a sleeping beauty to an awakened roaring lion. How to deal with such a neighbour is, as we have seen, the core of Mongolia's national security consideration and constitutes the essence of Mongolia's international diplomacy.

However, if Mongolia's persistent and eventually successful pursuit of 'single-State nuclear free zone' is any indication, Mongolia's approach to its national security is precisely through peace promotion. In the 1990s, Mongolia pre-empted the China threat by renouncing territorial pan-Mongolism, deciding not to support Inner Mongols in their struggle for independence. Mongolia was also lucky during the period, because China adopted Deng Xiaoping's dictum of self-restraint (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦) in its foreign policy, aiming to create a safe international environment for its economic development. While both sides intensified their commitment to good neighbourly posture, at the turn of the new millennium, Mongolia's geopolitical environment had fundamentally changed.

One of the important developments at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the formation of the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001, comprising China, Russia, and four of the five Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Both China and Russia actively encouraged Mongolia to be a member. Mongolia is attracted to the SCO principle that emphasizes 'mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of State borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation 2006) But it is also acutely aware that the SCO is intended as a rival to the US-dominated NATO, and it excludes most of Mongolia's third neighbours. Thus, Mongolia only applied for an observer status, refusing to join it as a member.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US and the subsequent US war in Iraq and Afghanistan offered an opportunity for Mongolia to get out of this straightjacket. Responding to the US call, Mongolia joined the US-led 'coalition of the willing' to disarm Saddam Hussein, and contributed to the UN peace-keeping operations. More recently, on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012, Mongolia became the 57<sup>th</sup> participating state of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (2012) in Europe, in which it has been active since 2004. Mongolia's active participation in the international collective military operation is an effort to secure and develop its position in the world by extricating itself from the Chinese and Russian spheres of influence, and as such it is exemplary of small states who 'are more likely to use international organizations as their preferred foreign policy tool (Hey 2003: 4)

While this may be the intention of any small state faced with a security threat, what needs to be explained in our case is the ability of Mongolia as a small and weak state to attract its third neighbours to value its contribution and consider it as a worthy neighbour. In the absence of any

military strength, paradoxically, Mongolia's military contribution cannot be assessed in terms of hard power, but only in terms of soft power, which, in Joseph Nye's original formulation is, 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. Further, it arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments (Nye 2004:10). This is not a moment to make a list of Mongolia's soft power; what I am interested in is whether Mongolia has 'smart power' to build a neighbourhood of peace.

Since 2001, an annual military exercise called Khan Quest has been organized in Mongolia by the Mongolian Armed Forces General Staff in conjunction with the US Pacific Command (PACOM). China and Russia responded to the American entry into Mongolia by launching their first joint military exercise since their alliance in Far East Russia's Vladivostok and in China's Shandong Peninsula from August 8 to 25, 2005. The US Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld and President Bush's visits to Mongolia in October and November in the same year were not just to express the US appreciation for Mongolia's steadfast support to the US war effort, but also to warn China and Russia to stay away from Mongolia. However, although Bush told a Mongolian reporter that the US would help Mongolia under military threat, saying 'We will support our allies for sure if a war cannot be avoided', a week after his visit, the Mongolian president paid an official visit to China. A China-Mongolia joint statement in Beijing declared that neither party would participate in any military-political alliance directed against each other and would not conclude any treaty and agreement with a third country that may adversely affect the interests of each other (United Daily News 2005:13).

Whatever the US intention, Mongolia has faithfully stuck to its Concept of Foreign Policy and its Concept of National Security adopted in 1994 that Mongolia would not provide a military base to any foreign country, and it would pursue a policy of non-alignment. The 1994 National Security Concept stated that Mongolia's 'military-political security can be ensured through a collective security system by joint efforts or participation in such a system'. What Mongolia had in mind was to transform its defence force into the international peace support and UN peacekeeping operations – a total internationalization of Mongolia's national defence.

In 2002 the Mongolian Parliament passed legislation that regulates participation of Mongolian military and civilian police personnel in UN peace operations. In 2006, against the tough joint Chinese and Russian military response, Mongolia deftly established a Peacekeeping Training Centre as

part of their Five Hills Training Facility, and launched an expanded military exercise involving 22 Asia-Pacific countries. Mongolia thereby became the first country in the region to organize a multinational peace support operations Command Post Exercise as well as Field Training Exercise with the Global Peace Operations Initiative of the US government. In 2007, the participants included Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Tonga, as well as Mongolia and the US.

In addition, since 2004, Mongolia has held annual bilateral military exercises with India, the so-called 'spiritual third neighbour' of Mongolia, and has called the exercise Nomadic Elephant since 2007. Since 2008 Mongolia and Russia have held annual anti-terror military exercises in Mongolia, and China and Mongolia began joint military exercises in 2009.

An important feature of all these military exercises is that the US, Russia, China, and India all have provided and continue to provide military aid to Mongolia. While each of these countries tries to draw Mongolia into its own orbit, Mongolia has steadfastly refused to provide military a base to any of its neighbours. Yet, at the same time, Mongolia has opened up and turned itself into a military public, creating a cosmopolitical space. In other words, Mongolia has brought in all the interested military neighbours, not to target any other neighbour, but for mutual understanding. The military exercises are to enhance Mongolia's ability to contribute to global peace keeping operations, on the premise that, according to John C.K. Daly, 'collective security is the best guarantor of military protection for small states' (Daly 2008).

Today, maintaining a small army of about 10,000 troops, Mongolia does not appear to have enemies in the neighbourhood, and its national defence is predicated on global peace-keeping, not fighting any national adversary. Seven hundred years after the collapse of the Mongol Empire, Mongols have come back to build a new *pax Mongolica*, not through war-mongering, but through peacekeeping.

## **Conclusion: the Centrality of Mongolia in the Assembled Neighbourhood**

The renowned world systems specialist Andre Gunder Frank (1992) once emphasized the centrality of Mongolia or Central Asia in shaping world history. I suggest that we look at contemporary Mongolia's relations with China also in terms of a world system, rather than purely within the framework of 'international relations'. If in the past, the nomadic Huns and Mongols

shaped the world by bursting out of the steppe and inserting themselves on other peoples through conquest, today, a tiny country is reshaping the world, albeit at a much smaller scale, perhaps even imperceptible to many. But the reassemblage of world neighbours on the Mongolian steppe shows that it is as much a working of big power competition as an active designing by the Mongols to build a world community of neighbours on the basis of sharing Mongolia's fortune-sovereignty – the *heshig*. It is not a *Zomia*, a land of refuge (Perdue 2008, Scott 2009), but its opposite, a contentious land with bursting energy.

The figure of neighbour is thus spatial and social as well as political. It is the proximity brought about by the reverse of the fortune-sovereignty that made China and the Chinese a neighbour that the Mongols have had to reckon with, and more importantly to establish their national boundary with. And similarly, like the ancient Chinese, who either cherished the men from afar (*huairou yuanren* 怀柔远人) or expelled the barbarians (*quchu dalu/hulu* 驱除鞑虏/胡虏) to maintain their 'all under heaven' (*tianxia* 天下), today, Mongols have also begun to engage in cosmic-moral re-ordering of the world around them, using their fortune-sovereignty.

Mongols are aware that in assembling neighbours from beyond Mongolia's immediate borders, Mongolia is actually building up a new regional polity to reduce conflict and hostility among nations in Northeast Asia. Ever conscious of history, the former Mongolian Ambassador to Japan Zamba Batjargal elaborated thus:

In 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Mongol Empire made the material and spiritual cultural exchange possible that linked the West and the East. And it created what we could call today a 'free trade zone' from Asia to Europe. It also established a political system that we could call the model of today's republican states. That time, because it implemented a generous religious and national politics among the people under its control, it was able to avert conflict and collision... The Mongolia experience shows that today big states and small states could be in equal and helpful collaboration and it [i.e., the experience] even can become an important model for the advancement of the Northeast Asian unification process. (Narangoa 2009: 377-378)

The Mongolian case shows that neighbouring does not have to be seen as a zero-sum relational game between two countries. The relational is also the organizational; in organizing or assembling a neighbourhood, Mongolia has tried to build up a cosmopolitan structure with Mongolia as the central



node. And this is to be achieved through managing the economic interest of all the world's powers by redistributing the fortune-sovereignty, that is, Mongolia's strategic mineral resources, among them.

Note that all those who come to Mongolia uninvited or actively invited are world powers, richer, technologically more advanced, and certainly militarily more powerful than Mongolia. Mongolia has neither hard power, nor soft power to match any of these neighbours in a one to one situation. Had Mongolia followed the traditional nation-state centred approach, it would have to fight on all fronts to keep the outsiders out, but this is precisely what Mongolia is least capable of. Instead of engaging in such a futile perimeter defence, Mongolia has proactively opened up its borders, reduced its number of soldiers, and invited the world in to share Mongolia's new-found fortune-sovereignty. It is in managing all these powerful neighbours, in maintaining peace among them by avoiding favouritism, or staying neutral in sharing Mongolia's fortune-sovereignty that Mongolia elevates itself above all these powers, becoming a 'big man', as it were.

In this new polity, it would serve the interest of none of the competing powers to reduce Mongolia's sovereign redistributive power. It is in everyone's interest that Mongolia remains a functional society and its political institutions are strengthened, rather than weakened. In this new Mongolia-centred world community of neighbours in the making, it is advisable that all follow the Mongolian political proverb, which says: *'deer n' suudalaa olvol, door n' guidlee olnoo'*, that is, if his highness finds his seat, those below will know how to run errands.

## 6 The Mobile and the Material in the Himalayan Borderlands

*Tina Harris\**

### Introduction: Fixing and Moving

When scans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *Tibet Mirror* newspaper became available online through Columbia University's Tharchin Collection in 2009, I was struck by how many of its pages featured eye-catching advertisements. For the most part, these advertisements depict hand-drawn images of items whose production and consumption locations seem relatively distant from each other. 'Asiatic Brand' soap guarantees a fine complexion to those who purchase it from outside of Asia; wool carders are proudly produced in Kalimpong, India, and are sold in Tibet and Ladakh; and European-made fountain pens and clocks are advertised for order by post.

*The Mirror* (*yul phyogs so so'i gсар 'gyur me long*), arguably one of the first Tibetan-language newspapers, began publication in Kalimpong, India in 1925, and was disseminated widely across the Himalayas, from Ladakh to Assam, to Tibet and Bhutan, and from Sikkim to Nepal until its eventual final run in 1963. Nearly every issue of the newspaper had commodity listings, giving the reader an idea of how Calcutta market prices in silver and gold fluctuated from month to month. They also illustrated the costs of items brought from Tibet to India and sold in the marketplaces across the Himalayas, such as musk, wool, and yak tails (the latter used for fly whisks and religious rituals in Asia and as Santa Claus beards in North America). The image below is but one of the many advertisements in the newspaper. It is drawn with the ubiquitous 'His Master's Voice' gramophone dog, advertising the 'diverse merchandise' and 'electrical appliances of all kinds' that were sold in a shop owned by a Tibetan Muslim in Lhasa.

These advertisements and listings in the *Tibet Mirror* demonstrate that transnational trade has long permeated the economic and social life of the towns along trade routes that crisscross the borders of China, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and beyond. Contrary to mostly western claims of it being a remote part of the world, the Himalayan region in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century was – and

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borders against illegal trade, or to build roads to facilitate unimpeded, free trade, neighbouring on a nation-state level often involves the rhetoric of fixity or mobility. However, the mobility of traders is more concerned with *circumvention* around obstacles such as borders or mountains, and this is most evident at the basic level of the material: people's relationships with things. All too often, the mobile processes and practices of bordering are inextricably linked to the seemingly fixed demarcation of a border. From an international relations or Sino-Indian nation-state perspective, the border is seen as governed by top-down laws and policies that are intangible to the inhabitants who live in these lands. Yet it makes more sense to think of how people deal with their borders instead of the other way around (Abraham and van Schendel 2005; Ludden 2003).

In the following pages, I examine how people in borderlands employ strategies and rhetoric that navigate the intersections of the mobile and the fixed. However, I would first like to emphasize that the mobile and fixed are not self-contained categories, nor are they binary opposites. I start from the premise that the borders of China are not necessarily fixed in place, but instead made up of walls, commodities, people, roads, and representations. As Brian Larkin has stated, 'infrastructures...are objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems' (Larkin 2013: 329). A border or a borderland then has no inherent, singular meaning, and can be transformed depending on who talks about it, who creates it, as well as who passes through (or, as is often the case, who is prevented from doing so). As a result, various actors with differential stakes in the development, meanings, and value of 'the border' – for instance, cartographers, representatives of the nation-state, traders, and construction workers – eventually allow some things to move and others to halt or be diverted. To privilege the border between China and its neighbours as a fixed structure that allows or prevents movement is to obscure the varied ways that traders use (or do not use, for that matter) it as part of a larger network of people and processes, such as the roads that arrive and leave from it, their counterparts who cross the border from the other side, and the border stones that are liable to be picked up and moved.

Cross-border trade, in engendering connectivity across distance, happens at the most micro level of simply getting material things across borders. The following sections of this chapter are roughly divided into three parts, featuring both historical and contemporary ethnographic examples of how traders evade and navigate the tensions between the mobile and the fixed in Himalayan borders, while creating new kinds of cross-border connections

that are often divergent to more established geopolitical narratives of change in the region. These three parts are based on historical accounts and traders' narratives from my research in India, Tibet (China), and Nepal in 2005-2007, and are loosely anchored by three interwoven features that most traders must deal with when crossing Sino-Indian or Sino-Nepali borders: Roads, Vehicles, and Land. These features may be thought of as 'moorings' from which neighbouring connections are made, both on a local scale and over longer distances.

The first section, 'Roads', deals with the entry of the British into Tibet in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the rhetoric of 'opening' the Sino-Indian border for trade, and the controversy over the location of trade marts. Here, I show how the British move to open up the border for strategic purposes actually resulted in the relocation of the cross-border road by local traders. The second section, 'Vehicles', examines processes of assembling and bringing automobiles over the border in two timeframes: the 1950s and the 2000s. These narratives demonstrate that the resilience of borderland trade vis-à-vis state regulatory mechanisms is based on the first-hand knowledge of logistical and technological changes across borders, but not without considerable risk. The final section, 'Land', looks at the anticipation surrounding the reopening of the Sino-Indian border in 2006, demonstrating that the move to invest in the potential *future* of the land around the border uncovers new ways of maintaining connections across distance – for both profit and family.

### **Roads: British Trade Marts in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The historical trade route from Lhasa in Tibet, to Kalimpong in West Bengal, India, has been shaped by major economic and political shifts over the past six decades involving the expansion of territory and access to new markets on the part of various stakeholders, including British India and China. As has been written elsewhere, early British 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 an interest in strategic expansion, where the British hoped their goods could be introduced to China through the 'back door' of Tibet (Harris 2013: 8). The establishment of British Trade Marts in Tibet provides one example of the close relationship between early 20<sup>th</sup> century British geopolitical strategy and its economic advancement, where the British needed this corridor to be opened in order for their role in the global market to be maintained.

**Figure 6.2** Map of Sikkim, Tibet, and India

Design: UvA-Kaartenmakers

The concern that the Russians were also invested in setting up trade links in Tibet was one reason for the 1904 invasion of Tibet led by Francis Younghusband (Cammann 1970: 147). The invasion was accompanied by the rhetoric of ‘opening up’ the border between present-day Sikkim and Tibet for trade, as if it were a fixed and closed part of a pristine, untouched landscape, a frontier with nothing there before. In reality, of course, Himalayan traders have been forging paths and travelling over these borders for centuries, underscoring the fact that nature is not inherently devoid of people; nor should it be thought of as residing in a realm separate from social interaction and labour (Smith 1984, Tsing 2005, Yeh 2009). This movement toward the ‘opening up’ of the borders between Sikkim and Tibet produced a situation that was actually contrary to ‘opening’ – and this phrase’s connotation of unimpeded, unrestricted mobility.

Although a rough road had been built from Darjeeling to the Jelep-la mountain pass in 1879, as well as several trade paths on the Tibet side of the border that were established earlier, the military activities of the British served to construct, repair, and solidify a route straight *through* India, the

Sikkimese border, and into the Chumbi Valley of Tibet. Edmund Candler, a Daily Mail correspondent who was dispatched with the Younghusband expedition in 1903, writes of the scale of the road-building activities in February 1904:

The troops are so busy making roads that they have very little time for amusements. The 8<sup>th</sup> Gurkhas have already constructed some eight miles of road on each side of Phari for the ekka [horse cart] transport. Companies of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Pioneers are repairing the road at Dotah, Chumbi, and Rinchengong. The 32<sup>nd</sup> are working at Rinchengong, and the sappers and miners on the Nathula and at Gautsa. (Younghusband 1971 [1910])

The opening of the border went along with the signing of a number of trade treaties put in place in order to establish other fixed structures – British Trade Marts – in the Tibetan towns of Gyantse, Gartok, and Yatung (Yadong in Figure 6.2; *gro mo* or Dromo in Tibetan), as well as the solid demarcation of boundaries between Sikkim and Tibet. To say they were ‘opening up’ the borderland was to mark the Tibetan borderland as a frontier, and to call it a new frontier was thus to mark it as ripe for exploration, even though it had already been inhabited and traversed by mobile people for centuries (Tsing 2005). Local Tibetans, however, offered some resistance to the building of the trade marts by building their own barrier at the border. 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 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 1971 [1910])

The British trade agencies doubled as administrative units; David MacDonal, a trade officer in Tibet for nearly twenty 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 [vis-à-vis China] to the Government of India (MacDonald 1999 [1930]: 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 and the closing-off of all border passes (McKay 1997). Thus, all of these actual constructions as well as the investment in these fixed constructions – the establishment of trade agencies, boundaries, and new roads – were intended to facilitate unimpeded ‘free trade’ for the British while restricting the movement of existing traders in the region. Of course, by building their own wall against that of the British encroachment into their territory, the Tibetan traders made certain that their control over the everyday economic life of the borderlands between Sikkim and Tibet was made known. And yet both the British and the Tibetans became stakeholders in what was more or less a similar goal – trying to move their commodities through the land in order to sell them to neighbouring buyers, employing strategies to circumvent obstacles that prevented smooth trade.

As James Scott has described in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), the intimate, locally-based understanding of the ‘friction of terrain’ or ‘friction of distance’ – for instance, how long it takes to get from mountain village to trade mart, or precisely when landslides might block the roads during monsoon season – brings the lived experiences of the trading landscape into better view. It is this understanding of the combination of terrain and infrastructural change that allows for the continuation of trade across borders, and accordingly, cross-border neighbouring practices. In recent years, a number of anthropologists have called for studying infrastructure more closely, as it both structures and ‘reveal[s] fragile relations between people, things, and the institutions (both public and private) that seek to govern’ (Appel et al. 2015, Larkin 2013). Studying peoples’ encounters with the materiality of transport, such as roads and shipping logistics (Chua 2015, Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012) involves not only mobility across borders, but the lesser-studied obstacles to mobility as well (Sheller 2010).

Although new roads allow for some goods to move more quickly to consumers and increase the return of capital; this often occurs up until the original market is saturated (Harvey 1991: 425). What this means is that the movement of goods across borders only works up to a point; that is, it creates its own barriers to further accumulation. In order for trade to continue to flow, a search for new markets in new places begins (Mitchell 1996: 112). If a new highway is built in order for commodities manufactured



in point A to get to new markets in point B, this route may very well be the quickest and most profitable for a limited period of time, at least until the markets are saturated and a new, more efficient opening is found. The process thus continues in new geographical spaces, but not without considerable controversy and resistance. In the case of this chapter, the British created new openings in the Chumbi Valley to open up new market paths while restricting movement for the locals. In response, many of the local traders retaliated by moving or destroying the British border markers, thus continuing to sustain their trading livelihoods (Bell 2000 [1924]).

The building of roads, walls, and border stones between Sikkim and Tibet allowed for more efficient trading – but in very different forms and by competing groups – allowing only certain kinds of capital (and goods and people) to move quickly. In this case, the struggle between the British and Tibetans over the construction of the border, its roads, its marts, and its goods, is a struggle over power; over who has access to and control over goods and capital that are not attached to, but travel through the Himalayan landscape. As Candler concludes in his account, ‘trade marts and roads, and telegraph-wires, and open communications are important issues, but they were never our main objective. What was really necessary was to make the Tibetans understand that they could not afford to trifle with us’ (Candler 1905: 300). Here, the rhetoric and the move to open up ‘fixed’ borders on the part of the British actually gave rise to obstructions by the locals. This trade route is but one window through which to see how neighbouring incorporates managing how material goods travel, in situations where both parties must decide if the profits to be made over a distance are more important than the local barriers. This is a story that repeats itself further below in transporting goods over the mountains, and in investing in land near the border. The next section will explore these ideas further, and will move from looking at the route to looking at the transportation in the context of the Sino-Indian border in the mid-1950s, soon after the Chinese entered Tibet.

### **Vehicles: Technologies of Moving Goods Across Borders**

Each step in the process of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cross-border Himalayan trade involved numerous producers, traders, border officials, local officials, transportation agents, brokers, and consumers. The gramophone advertised in the *Tibet Mirror* depicted at the beginning of this chapter likely arrived from England by ship at the ports of Bombay or Calcutta, and was then sold

through dealers in those cities, taken by train up to Darjeeling and loaded onto mule caravans, and then carried over the high reaches of the Himalayas into Tibet. The yak tails in the commodity listings of the *Mirror* might have been sold by nomads in central Tibet, exported by a network of muleteers on yaks, mules, and trucks, and were eventually used to make Santa Claus beards in Canada. These routes – based on multiple traders' oral narratives of how commodities were exported from and imported to Tibet in the 1950s – provide a telling example of the process of transport and assembly over the mountains. It is these intimate, micro-level actions on a local level that enable goods, vehicles, and people to cross great distances – a process that is part and parcel of what it means to 'neighbour'.

The entry of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Tibet in 1951 is often used by scholars and Tibetans as a historical marker dividing the 'old society' from the 'new society', and indeed, many traders spoke about changes in their lives in relation to this temporal rift. But traders' stories about this time period also reflect the first phase of rapid improvements in road maintenance by China, in order to get supplies – petrol and construction materials – to develop Tibet. Because of this, most cross-border traders mentioned that the early 1950s was the best time to make money in Tibet; it was one of the most prosperous times they'd ever had. An elderly man in his 70s from a Dromo (Yadong) trading family noted that 'from 1951, the Chinese army really needed supplies. In 1955 roads were built in Dromo, and many of these [supplies] came through Dromo. From that year on, our business became bigger, and the town became wealthier'. Similarly, an older woman in her 80s reminisced that although 'life' – she used the generic term – was much better before the PLA's 'Peaceful Liberation' of Tibet, her shop in Lhasa flourished during the 1950s. 'Before the Peaceful Liberation, there were no phones. We had messengers, and a small post office. After the Peaceful Liberation, then we got phones and roads, then it became *much* easier to trade!' Changes in transport and technology in turn lend a hand to particular ideas of what closer 'neighbouring' actually meant to the traders in the 1950s: more prosperity; at least amongst these individuals, and at this time.

Similarly, during a conversation with Ahmed, a Nepali Muslim salesman in his 80s (in a mixture of Urdu, Tibetan, and Nepali, which sometimes had to be translated by his nephew), he remembered his stint with the Bhajuratna/Syamukapu Company, one of the first Nepali/Newar trading companies that established an office in Lhasa. He joined Bhajuratna as a salesman in 1954, and in 1955 he began travelling back and forth from Lhasa. Much of Ahmad's remembrances involve the logistics and nitty-gritty

of simply getting the goods across the mountains from town to town via foot and mule caravans. He discussed how he headed from Gangtok to Nathula; then to Yadong at the Tibetan side of the border, and seeing the border marker at 14,000 feet. He detailed the coldness of the journey as he headed through the Chumbi Valley, up to Sharshima in Tibet. 'The Chinese were there, up in that place, in 1955', he said, 'to develop it'. From there, he went to Phari (see Figure 6.2), which took nearly one and a half to two days on foot, and from there he went to Gyantse. After Gyantse, he travelled to Shigatse, and eventually to Lhasa'.

This kind of experience of travelling across borderlands is not particularly unique, but it is certainly much more telling about what it means to cross borders than what a cartographic map will represent (Harris 2013: 19). Following James Scott (2009), Ahmed's particular narrative of the pathways of trade – understanding the friction of terrain – blurs the boundaries of nation-state-centred lines on a map. Ahmed – and indeed, most other working traders – never spoke about travelling 'from India to China', but instead, how he journeyed from town to town to hire another set of mules or meet fellow Muslims in the region. Managing distance occurs through the intimate connections of cross-border trade relationships; encountering and circumventing natural obstacles such as mountains or blizzards, or man-made barriers such as borders or customs procedures.

This period in the 1950s coincided with the mass introduction of automobiles to the Tibetan plateau. Although the first automobile was brought over the Himalayas to Gyantse in 1906, and the thirteenth Dalai Lama was famously presented with a blue baby Austin in the 1920s, several members of the elite Tibetan families began to purchase personal cars at this time. Many older traders gave narratives of the laborious task of taking French Peugeot cars apart piece by piece, bringing them by foot and by mule caravans over the border into Tibet, then reassembling them on the other side. After transporting Indian bicycles to Tibet for a few years, Ahmed got involved in bringing automobiles over the border in the mid to late 1950s. He describes the process as follows:

The car would be in different pieces. For Phari, [there was] a little bit of transportation up to Shigatse. Not so good roads, dirt roads. Until early in 1958, that was the way we were doing it. We would assemble the cars. They were getting 8,000 Indian rupees to assemble the cars. From Siliguri, they would have 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. (Harris 2013: 45)

This procedure of taking entire automobiles apart piece by piece, and strapping each piece on the back of a human or mule lugging it over treacherous Himalayan pathways is striking, reflecting a peculiar period of early economic growth and technological change in the borderland region. At the time in the 1950s, the quickest and most cost-effective way to get cars to Tibet was to utilize this laborious method; this is the kind of specific knowledge that Ahmed and other traders had at the time. Yet, as roads began to be constructed and expanded, and more of these cars were utilized, it was possible to complete the entire journey by the assembled car and to get rid of the porters. But for this short period in the contemporary history of trade across Asian borderlands, the strategic role of traders in transportation is made visible, where they are intimately involved in the construction and maintenance of journeys of goods across distance.

In order to talk about further changes in transport and bordering practices, I now move to more recent narratives concerning the introduction of jeeps across the Chinese and Nepali borders. Tenzin, a Tibetan trader in household appliances, talks about the logistics of how transport has changed over the Sino-Nepal border in 2006, and the pressure she felt to get goods across borders more quickly. A trip from Tibet to Nepal that used to take several weeks in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with a combination of loaded mules and trucks crossing over treacherous dirt paths, now takes about a day. In the mid-1960s, the Tibet-Nepal Friendship Highway was completed, and over the years, motor transport built up slowly and steadily over the approximately 800 kilometre-long road from Lhasa to the Tibetan border town of Zhangmu, and from the Nepali border town of Kodari to Kathmandu along the Arniko Highway. As Tenzin says, even in the late 1990s, it still took a significant while to build up a trusting relationship with the middlemen drivers and therefore to increase efficient transport networks:

Now ... we must transport [items] much more quickly. We buy things there [in Nepal], then come back [to Tibet] quickly. There is a Nepalese truck to Dram [the border town on the Tibet side] and then a Tibetan truck from there. We are not allowed to bring the Nepalese truck from there to Lhasa. We change people and trucks at same time. We must pay twice. We know all the drivers now, they call us when the stuff is here in Lhasa. It is easier now. Eight or nine years ago, we had to travel along with the trucks, because we didn't know the drivers. Now we trust them, we have been doing a business for a long time with five or six of the same drivers.

Here, any stalling or possibility of gridlock needs to be avoided, because owners of companies as well as consumers get upset if shipments are delayed, and the turnover time of profits will slow down. Because of this, it becomes less possible to check every truck and jeep heading across the borderlands without an advanced kind of security technology. As Carolyn Nordstrom has written in her work on cross-border trade and illegal global networks – from arms traders in Angola to the dock workers in Rotterdam shipyards – ‘movement is primary, borders are secondary – laws, some might say, are tertiary’ (Nordstrom 2007: 116). Establishing trust, then, is a major form of negotiation that anchors and reconfirms social and economic networks across borders. In this case, Tenzin spent time going along with the drivers to make sure her goods reached their destination, so she eventually conducted business with the drivers who doubled as traders. It mattered less that these drivers were Chinese than the fact that Tenzin could trust them to continue the unfettered transport of her items across the border. These skills ‘are as much an information and knowledge-based economy as it is a ‘moral’ economy ... generally a superior degree of knowledge and skills, built over the years, rather than a greater degree of ‘ethnic’ solidarity which allowed some merchant networks to have the better of others’ (Markovits 2013: 155).

Consider, however, the case of Lhakpa, a Tibetan trader, who also made most of his living in 2003 and 2004 renting a seat in a shared jeep, travelling back and forth across the Chinese-Tibetan and Nepali borders, bartering goods. He discusses the introduction of a new phase of transport in 2006, where some of the Tibet-based traders began purchasing their own jeeps in the borderlands. Lhakpa remembered taking cotton textiles from Tibet to Nepal, where it cost NPR 1,250 (approximately US\$16) for ten kilograms and being able to sell the cotton in Kathmandu for a fair profit at NPR 1,700 (approximately US\$22).

That time [2003-2004] we had big profit. Then they [the traders on the Tibet side] made new prices, because they had their own jeep. They brought [the jeeps] themselves. They didn’t have to pay their own drivers because it is their own jeep. I now have to go in someone else’s jeep and I have to pay tax. In Tibet, though, the profit goes up and up. Here [in Nepal] it goes down and down. All the damage is done by the drivers who do the trade from Tibet to here. I cannot make any profit now. Now the traders are only the drivers. Because they don’t have to pay, because they have their own taxi, own car, own jeep. They can have two ways of getting money; from the passenger they can get extra money, and then they bring their own ‘luggage’.

In this case, it might be easy to say that the introduction of a new form of technology such as a jeep (or a mobile phone, for that matter) significantly changes peoples' lifestyles and the shape of trade. This is, of course, not to view advancements in technology as undesirable, but more to reiterate the position of human involvement in trade and the shaping of routes and borderland spaces. It is therefore not the fast jeep itself that changes patterns of profit, but the complex processes of how traders and middlemen are able to access new technologies like a jeep, side by side with the knowledge that these sorts of decisions will increase (or decrease) efficiency in cross-border trade.

To subsist and thrive as a trader in a borderland is to stay on top of logistical changes; to be in a position to negotiate new trading positions vis-à-vis the other stakeholders in the changing economic landscape. In this case, the 'successful' traders along the China-Nepal border became the ones who could afford to purchase their own jeeps, the ones who had easier and immediate access to transport over the border. Lhakpa has since had to consider abandoning his cross-border networks and think about specializing only in trade within Nepal itself. These border flows are considerably uneven and also reflective of economic changes on a larger, regional scale. For instance, trade between India and China at Nathula went from two million INR (approximately US\$43,000) in 2006 to almost ten million INR (approximately US\$217,000) in 2010 (Subba 2011). But a closer look at the figures for exports and imports show that they are extremely uneven. By the first half of 2013, India's exports to China were around US\$5 billion, while its imports from China grew to over US\$24 billion (Mehdudia 2013). Thus, at the beginning of the reopening of the pass in 2006, traders who could negotiate these flows of goods and networks from Tibet – especially those who had Chinese language skills – were increasingly able to get their diverse commodities (for instance, washing machines, grains, household items, carpets, packaged foods, and clothing) across the border with fewer chances of gridlock. Managing the flow of cross-border trade is often about weighing the costs and benefits of generating different kinds of mobility in order to avoid gridlock. Looking at decisions that traders make about transportation on an intimate, material level is also about looking at the decisions that govern the relationships between people and goods on both sides of the border. The next section takes us from narratives of transport to the third mooring, the land near the border of India and China. Here, neighbouring practices are based on how people believe *future* cross-border trade might affect the value of the land.

## Land: Speculation and Unevenness

In 1962, the Sino-Indian War resulted in the sealing-off of all of the border passes between China and India, and cross-border trade between India and Tibet more or less halted. Much of this cross-border trade was diverted through Nepal. But after the start of Chinese reforms in 1978, the growth of China and India as major economic powers led to renewed Sino-Indian trade negotiations, as well as the re-opening of two western Sino-Indian border passes in the 1990s. These passes, Lipu Lekh and Shipkila, currently feature very limited, seasonal, small scale trade in items such as jaggery, barley, household utensils, and goats, and only for residents with the necessary import-export codes. Most recently in 2006, a third mountain pass between India and Tibet, Nathula, reopened for trade after 44 years. Very much like the excitement over 'opening-up' the Chumbi Valley during the time of the British encroachment into Tibet in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, speculation over the future capacity of this trade corridor – in tandem with the value of the land – began to grow again in the early 2000s in Tibet. Looking at a map of Asia and focusing in on the thumb of Sikkim that borders Tibet, one can see that geographically, this border opening provides quick access to the port of Calcutta. Subsequently, transport time is cut short for shuttling goods to and from China and the sea, like it did in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was the reason why the British had their eyes set on this border. Today, however, the direction has changed. Instead of the majority of trade goods moving from Calcutta to markets in Tibet and China, the direction is now reversed, with Chinese traders looking towards new markets to the south. This shift in location and the direction of trade – from what was seen as 'empty land' in the 1950s to profitable land with potential in the 2000s – has profound implications for this borderland region.

Speaking to Roshan, a local Indian official in Sikkim who was directly involved in increasing the flows of commerce between India and Tibet in 2006, he mentioned the increase in Chinese goods through the Nathula border to India.

People these days are crazy about Chinese goods. The cost of freight is much less through Nathula. Iron ore from China comes by sea, and it would be much easier to bring it through Nathula. Plus, [there's the] train extension [from Beijing to Lhasa and plans for it to expand further down to Yadong]. Now, through the Calcutta and Bombay port, you can trade anything, but here with border trade, things are a little more difficult. We expect full-fledged trade in this region within four to five years,

import and export. There is a four-lane highway from Gyantse to Lhasa being built; it will be completed within two years. And there will be a four-lane highway to Siliguri, but it will be completed within four to five years. China wants to send goods to the Middle East and Africa, and will have no problem doing this. There will be a massive increase in trade, as this region is a hugely important corridor.

This rhetoric of the potential increase in mobility of trade through the region translates into the excitement over what it means to be living in a borderland at the time of increased global interest in the economic ‘rise’ of China. It is important to note that the enthusiasm over the potential of the borderland area was not necessarily limited to individuals like Roshan who were official representatives of trade in the area. There was also a shared local interest in the land along the border, but this took on a variety of guises. During fieldwork in Tibet in 2006, I heard many stories of middle-class and upwardly-mobile Tibetans purchasing and investing in land in the southern part of Shigatse province near the Indian border in anticipation of the reopening of the Nathula border in the summer of that year. To take one example, Norbu and his wife live in Kathmandu, while his Tibetan relatives still live in the Dromo/Yadong area on the Tibetan side of the Nathula border with India. Norbu told me about his uncle, whom he hadn’t seen for twenty years and was hoping to meet now that the border was reopening:

My mother’s brother lives [near] Nathula in Tibet, the border of Nathula ... He knows everything, so he came [to live] near the Nathula area. He bought land, and built a house also ... my mother told me that he is a Chinese worker, his post is little bit higher, [in a] government office or something. He has lot of money, so many yak, my mother tells me. So many yak, sheep, goats.

Similarly, an ethnic Tibetan government worker for a Chinese state institution told me about the potential advantages of opening up all borders to the south of Tibet. ‘Look at Heilongjiang and Xinjiang!’ he exclaimed. ‘Those areas are much more developed than Tibet – those borders with other countries are already open’. He noted that there was a time in the 1980s, when opening up Nathula first began to be discussed between China and India, and ‘people bought land for RMB 200,000 (approximately US\$25,000)’. Now, he says ‘you even can’t get land for RMB 600,000 (approximately US\$75,000)’. Further, a trader who used to trade between Nepal and Tibet



talked about his small trading company moving to the India-Tibet border in 2006. He said:

Yadong [on the Tibet side of the Sino-Indian border] is going to open pretty soon. My previous company, they actually want me to come back and continue to work for them, and they also purchased space there, some property, and they want to start their trade business there. Yeah, seems like Yadong is going to open pretty soon. There are a lot of indications.

Investment in land around the border areas of China and India is premised on what can be more easily moved across and through the land near the border in the *future*, extending the notion of 'the borderland' both spatially and temporally. But only some individuals can get access to the highly valued land around the border, such as Norbu's uncle, who works for the Chinese government. The last quote is from Tendor, who became relatively prosperous after a successful career selling refrigerators and other white goods, and who can afford to shift his trading base to another location. However, on the level of local Tibetan traders buying land, these stories are not just about maximizing their trading profits, but the potential of more easily reconnecting and interacting with their transnational families and trading partners on the other side of the border, a border that has been marked by years of mistrust and political violence, from the Sino-Indian War to Tibetan refugees escaping from China. According to one trader in Sikkim, after the border reopened, he was amazed to see families reunite forty-four years after the border had been closed, including an 85-year old man who had reunited with his 55-year old daughter. 'Some people were crying the whole day', he said. Investing in this borderland uncovers new ways of establishing connections across distance. Although investment occurs for numerous reasons, including profit and reconnection, they all involve assigning value to fixed land in order to move mobile things across it.

To further exemplify the differences between individual experiences of living in this area with a newly-opened border, the unlimited 'free trade' promised by both the Chinese and Indian governments was nowhere to be found, at least on the Indian side in 2006. When Nathula was reopened for trade on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 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 checkpoints from Gangtok to the border, and there were long bureaucratic delays in obtaining the proper import-export codes, as well as strict restrictions on

who could apply for trade permits (for now, only 'Sikkimese subjects'). A trader in India mentioned his frustration with getting across the border:

Donqingang is the market on the China side; it is 11km away from Rinchengang, but Indian traders are not allowed to go here. So at 7:30 am the border opens, then we go through customs clearance, and get there by 8am. The ITBP [Indo Tibet Border Police] escort us to Nathula, then from other side, the ITBP escort the Tibetans to Sheratang. But from Nathula to Donqingang, there are no escorts, no risk, on that side you can do anything!

Mobility across the border is extraordinarily uneven; the difficulties mentioned above are mainly reflective of the experiences of Indian traders needing to get to the Tibet side, for most of the roads have already built up on the Tibetan/Chinese side. And although investment in land is increasing on the Tibetan/Chinese side of the border, the situation is markedly different on the Indian and Nepali sides of the border. Lhakpa talked about the unevenness in efficiency of trade and transport between the Chinese and Nepali sides of the border:

From Tibet ... they had already made a new road. But the Nepali government, they haven't started. They had [made the] measurements more than ten times already, only the measurement. But no starting. The road is from Kyirong [in Tibet] to the China border already, but the Nepali people haven't started [the work]. All the people want to go to Tibet by shortcut, they want to pay less money. From the Chinese border there are a lot of changes. The workers are not Indian, not Nepali ... it is not Chinese labor, but all the labor is from [Tibetans]. A lot of women too. Only the engineers are Chinese.

Here, the road is ready on the Chinese side, but not on the Nepal side (the road was finally opened in December 2014). There is a significant unevenness in the gendered and ethnic division of labour as well. I often heard things like, 'we are not advantaged here [in India]. In Tibet there are very good roads on the other side of Jelep-la already'. Here, the land provides another mooring from which to understand how the rhetoric of unimpeded mobility bumps up against traders' everyday realities of simply trying to get goods across the border. These unequal mobilities can be seen on a number of scales at once: from some goods that are allowed across the border more easily than others; to individual traders who have better access to more

extensive cross-border networks; to some states that have the capacity to invest in more infrastructure than others.

### **Conclusion: 'Diverse Merchandise'**

In this chapter, I have attempted to link ethnographic narratives with geographies of trade in order to better understand the diverse and uneven experiences of exchange, transport, and economic change along the borders of China/Tibet, Nepal, and India. Ultimately, this chapter aimed to demonstrate that shifts in Asian economic geographies – such as the current 'rise' of a China-driven economy – is in turn steered by traders' individual skills, circumventions, and negotiations through three facets of trade: the roads, the vehicles, and the (border)land. In the cases described above, these shifts include border and road construction and disruptions, changes in modes of transportation and transport, as well as the (unequal) flows of commodities and materials into new market spaces. It is necessary to focus less on the representations and power of 'fixed' borders and more on the fact that mobile people employ the skills of neighbouring in order to make better use of immediate and profound changes to their material life – their landscape and trading paths – as well as to manage (and accrue profit, of course) in an economically volatile Himalayan trading environment. And yet these are inevitably rather mundane things that people deal with every day: a bridge is closed, a new kind of mode of transportation becomes more popular, a road is slated to be reopened.

Roads, vehicles, and land have provided the 'moorings' from which to examine these interconnected processes of neighbouring. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think of these three features as isolated entities or as having agency in and of themselves. Instead, the traders who are directly involved in moving across the borders of China, Nepal, and India employ specific ways of interacting and producing the future shape of roads, vehicles, and land: a border marker can be moved; a jeep can be taken apart and reassembled, and border land can be given new meaning when people move closer to their families who reside on the other side of the border. There is also a profound unevenness to these experiences. Some traders never get to 'the other side', nor do they manage to survive economically in the cutthroat environment of trade if having control or access to certain dominant flows of capital – British or Chinese, for instance – is the mark of a more 'successful' trader. Furthermore, although the tensions between mobility and fixity that have characterized the movement of capital across

borders have followed similar patterns in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1950s, and the early 2000s, the groups involved have taken radically different shapes. Yet trade is resilient, and new technologies such as cars and railways do not always triumph over the challenges of geographical distance, nor do descriptions of mobility and transport always take the storybook form of the powerful players versus the underdogs. It is thus these curious narratives and gaps – such as when it is easier to haul a car over a mountain by foot than it is to drive it across – that provide the lens through which we can glimpse moments of economic and technological transformation in a region that is often depicted as developing too fast for scholars to grasp.

Towards the end of my stay in northern India in 2006, an Indian trader and I spoke about the trading activity back and forth across the Sino-Indian border. He said, ‘they [the traders] will all tell you not much is happening on the border, that only certain goods can go through, and there is not much opportunity’. In reality, he said – along with several other traders that I spoke with – that the official (low) figures of border trade don’t tell you much. There is an enormous amount of unsanctioned items – mobile phones and alcohol, for example – that somehow end up on both sides of the border. New roads that are ‘opened’ for free(r) trade – using the same rhetoric from both the time of Youngusband to the current role of the PRC – are therefore used in unexpected ways, for both restricted and unsanctioned purposes, the latter often in order for traders to continue to survive. Traders look for and know about gaps: opportune moments and places in border policies, in technological advances, and in route changes in order to manoeuvre around restrictions and to survive as traders. During these moments, they need to know when it is better to be mobile or better to stay put, notwithstanding the constraints that might prevent them from doing so. In this sense, new roads and borders – at least those that are semi-permeable – can sometimes be beneficial for traders, as they increase the opportunities for such gaps at the time when they are established. Although the ‘diverse merchandise’ advertised at the beginning of this chapter included gramophones and fountain pens, the ‘diverse merchandise’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> century now takes the shape of mobile phones and Hyundai automobiles. These are all subject to the same skills of neighbouring, processes that consist of traders’ understandings of how cars, roads, land, and capital have the potential to become more or less mobile, vis-à-vis the changing economic landscape in the Himalayan borderlands.



**Section 3**  
*Agonistic Intensities*



## 7 Odd Neighbours

### Trans-Himalayan Tibetan Itineraries and Chinese Economic Development

*Chris Vasantkumar*

#### **Introduction: To Exile and Back**

In 1959, the fourteenth Dalai Lama and much of the old Tibetan religious and cultural elite fled into exile in India. In the intervening years Tibetans on both sides of the Himalayas have not stayed put but have instead travelled frequently back and forth across the range's high passes. These journeys have been manifold, ranging from taking refuge in the exile communities of north India, to temporary trans-Himalayan sojourns on Chinese passports to visit relatives living abroad and arduous and illicit round trips embarked upon for the purposes of religious or linguistic instruction. In the West, discussions of these movements have focused almost exclusively on the figure of the refugee. And, certainly, the first wave of Tibetan migration south across the ranges was composed largely of refugees from central Tibet. Since the 1980s, however, a second set of migrants, mostly from the regions of Kham and Amdo in what was historically eastern Tibet, has undertaken the difficult journey across the mountains to the subcontinent.

Prior to 2008 when Tibetan unrest across China prompted a crackdown on trans-border flows, several thousand migrants a year or more travelled to (and, in many cases, from) Dharamsala and other Tibetan refugee centres in northern and southern India. SaveTibet.org notes in their annual reports on the 'conditions impacting the flight of Tibetan refugees'<sup>1</sup> that following the 2008 protests and ramped up border patrols, the number of Tibetans who made it across the border to Nepal (and in many cases beyond to India) dropped from an average of 2,500-3,000 in preceding years to a much lower range of 650-850 per annum thereafter.<sup>2</sup> While many of these migrants were inspired by (or sent by parents<sup>3</sup> who were inspired by) the prospect

1 See <http://www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/refugee-report-dangerous-crossing-2011>.

2 As of 2016, these trans-border flows have been halted almost completely by heightened Chinese patrols and cooperation between PRC and Nepalese authorities.

3 That a sizeable percentage of pre-2008 migrants were juveniles can be explained by the fact that refugees who arrive in Dharamsala under the ages of 18 can gain access to free or extremely low cost education at the Tibetan Children's Villages in the surrounding area. Most of my migrant



of religious freedom and unfettered access to traditional Tibetan culture, many others maintained a more pragmatic attitude toward the physically taxing, dangerous and often costly journey to the subcontinent.<sup>4</sup>

Such peregrinations have had manifold effects. The ambivalent reception of the 'new arrivals' (or *sarjorpa*) of 'sinicized' Tibetans fresh off the path, as it were, from Tibet itself have complicated notions of national belonging in the exile community (Diehl 2002, Falcone and Wangchuk 2008, on broader circuits of Tibetan travel see Hess 2009, Yeh 2007). Many 'new arrivals' have returned<sup>5</sup> to China,<sup>6</sup> bringing with them both a critical consciousness of the blandishments of Chinese nationalism and English-language skills

informants had gone to India at a slightly older age and were thus unable to access educational facilities of quite as high a standard, but did receive instruction in English and other subjects at Tibetan Transit Schools.

4 One example: In 2007, Jashi was a 24 year old recently returned from India working as a guide for foreign tour groups. In some respects he is happy to be back home – obviously being close to family is a good thing, and he is resigned to making the best of being in China in general, but he misses his 'school' and his friends in India. He had decided to go of his own accord at the age of fifteen. At that time he said (in a mixture of English and Chinese), he was feeling 'very hard, very excited (*jidong* 激动)' and had met many folks who had been there and had told him how great it was there: everything is free and you can learn English. So he made his way to Lhasa and stayed there for a month arranging the travel permit to Dram. From Dram he and his small party made their way painstakingly across the border, taking five days to reach Taptopani. His fellow travelers were limited to the guide who commanded the princely sum of RMB2,500 (over US\$600) and a middle-aged couple whose children were living on the subcontinent. The woman had stomach problems and sometimes couldn't walk and the man was almost blind. During the day the going was okay, but at night things got difficult. Jashi recalls leading the man by the hand across narrow log bridges. Once he got to India, he was only able to communicate with family by phone and email but he really enjoyed the freedom to experience new things and the camaraderie with fellow students at his school. His friends came from various places, Amdo, Lhasa and Kham. He had many good Kham friends, not all of whom he was able to maintain contact with because it seems he left suddenly (not knowing when ahead of time) and didn't think about getting contact info ahead of time. Now he has fellow returnee friends who say they don't miss India. He thinks they are crazy.

5 For example, in the 23-person cohort that entered the Tibetan Transit School in the late 1990s with Yeshe, a monk from a farming village near Zhuoni, only two had stayed behind a decade later.

6 In their returns we can see an ironic convergence of the rhetoric of the Tibetan Government in Exile and of China. Since the 1990s, the Dalai Lama has suggested that all new migrants who would not be endangered (as a result of a history of anti-Chinese activism) by returning to China should do so (see Garratt 1997). At the same time, the PRC for many years prior to the events of 2008 (and still to some degree formally at least thereafter) has encouraged 'Overseas Tibetan Compatriots' (*Guowai Zangzu Tongbao* 国外藏族同胞) to join their returned brethren (*Huiguo Zangzu Tongbao* 回国藏族同胞) to join the big trans-national family of Chinese patriots (see Barabantseva 2012, Vasantkumar 2012). As Basang, deputy secretary of the Tibet Regional Committee of the Communist Party of China explained in a 2002 interview in the People's Daily,

that enabled them to succeed in the rapidly developing tourism sector back 'home'.<sup>7</sup> Even in the years of reduced trans-border mobility that have followed in the wake of the turmoil of 3/14, Tibetans on both sides of the Himalayas are acutely aware of how their co-ethnics elsewhere live. Ideas of Tibetan nation, culture and community have come to straddle the Himalayas rather than (or in addition to) be(ing) divided by them.

This chapter deals with a subset of related issues that arose during my first extended period of fieldwork in Xiahe/Labrang – in what is now Gansu Province in China's northwest – from the summer of 2003 until the spring of 2004, that I also pursued in the course of additional field research in Xiahe in 2006, 2007 and 2009 and in Dharamsala in 2006 and 2007. I had initially come to northwest China to study the relationship between everyday interactions between members of different *minzu* or ethnic groups in a national framework, specifically between Han, Hui and Tibetans and official PRC projects of multi-ethnic national unity, but as I stayed on in Labrang through a typically frigid winter, I found myself becoming increasingly interested in a particular problem of Tibetanness with both national and trans-national characteristics.

From early on in my fieldwork, I had many interactions with 'locals' from the town itself, from outlying regions of the autonomous prefecture in which Xiahe/Labrang is located and from remoter parts of Amdo who had spent time in the exile communities of the Indian subcontinent. The duration of their visits ranged from a few months to upwards of five, seven, or even ten years. Some detested India from the moment they arrived, others still reminisced fondly about pizza and sang tunes from Bollywood musicals,<sup>8</sup> but all had for various reasons chosen to return to Amdo. Some had returned furtively with a critical consciousness of the limits of Chinese nationalism.

China's policy is 'All patriots belong to one big family, no matter when they join the family' (People's Daily 2002).

7 Access to such employment opportunities was never guaranteed, especially inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region. There, employment as a tour guide was often contingent on passing a test in written Chinese. The earlier a Tibetan returnee had left for India, the less likely he or she would be able to pass such a test (Martin Saxer, personal communication).

8 Early in my dissertation research in the late summer of 2003, a returnee monk invited me on a picnic with a dozen or so students he was informally teaching English. As we reclined in post-prandial comfort in a mountain meadow high above Labrang Monastery, he invited each of us to sing favorite songs for the group. When others reacted with shyness, he plunged right in. It took me a second (and a double take) to realize that he had broken into a tuneful rendition of the Bollywood classic '*Kuch kuch hota hai*'. Later he introduced me to another returnee, also a monk, whose first question to me was 'Do you know pizza? I like pizza'. It turned out that he had worked in a pizza parlour for several years during his time in Dharamsala.

Others found that their time in India with the religious and cultural elite of old Tibet had instilled not a greater reverence for traditional culture but, perhaps surprisingly, a high modernist and rather acerbic anti-clericalism. Still others had returned with official blessing to cash in on the promise of economic development.

Initially, I attempted to analyze their travels within a received framework that sought to understand Tibetan exile and refuge taking in purely Tibetan terms. Only later did I realize that this problem of Tibetanness was also a problem of Chineseness – that it was in fact inseparable from the changing political and economic circumstances of life in China. I realized in other words, that scholars needed a means of analyzing both the interrelationships between Tibetan itineraries and ‘Chinese’ economic development and the reasons behind the invisibility of these interconnections.

### **‘Oddness’ and Other Predicaments of Neighbouring**

To this end, in this chapter I employ the notion of ‘oddness’ as discussed by John Hartigan, Jr. in his work on Whiteness in the US to argue for the necessity of reframing scholarly approaches to contemporary Tibetan trans-Himalayan mobilities. Hartigan (2005) employs this clunky, yet, I insist, generative term in his work to highlight the importance of attending to ‘disjunctive, yet clearly related’ aspects of ‘cultural identity’. Hartigan seeks to gain critical purchase on the class dimensions to Whiteness that are often rendered invisible by a focus on generalized White social privilege. By juxtaposing a historically minded exposition of the emergence and growth of ‘White trash’, first as an epithet and later as a means of self-identification with a situated analysis of ‘the powers and privileges associated with whiteness’ (Hartigan 2005: 1), Hartigan seeks to bring ‘the social predicament of poor whites’ (2005: 4) back into the picture while at the same time attending to processes of racialization and the means by which White Privilege is perpetuated.

In doing so, Hartigan suggests that these two figures, of White Privilege and White Trash are precisely ‘odd’ because, ‘they are difficult to hold equally in view’ – one is associated with ‘domination and hegemony’; the other applies to a population that is ‘far from dominant (Hartigan 2005: 2)’. In Hartigan’s analysis of American Whites, he suggests that because ‘prevailing academic discussions’ assume that the pair of whiteness and blackness is ‘sufficient for explaining race ... the degraded status of poor whites ... fall[s] from view’ (Hartigan 2005: 2). The race-based story of White Privilege in this

case trumps class and poor whites are effectively erased. In this chapter, I want to apply Hartigan's analytic oddness to the returned Tibetans I met in and around Labrang as a means of highlighting the ways in which the figure of the refugee has effectively enabled the returned, or migrant Tibetan to drop from view in scholarly circles. Further, by decentring the refugee as the figure *par excellence* of migrant Tibetans in the contemporary world, I want to bring two sets of odd juxtapositions back into the picture.

First I think we can begin to reclaim from obscurity those Tibetan trans-Himalayan journeying practices that do not conform to the refugee ideal – those journeys where religion or cultural nationalism may not be primary motivating factors. Such journeys, I suggest below, have been difficult to 'hold equally in view' with journeys of taking refugee in no small part due to a politics of culture that scripts Tibetan motivations as always already separate from China (cf. Adams 1996). In such a frame, the motivations for Tibetan sojourns are seen as explicable in purely Tibetan religio-cultural (or historical) terms and are thought not to be shaped in any meaningful way by the concerns of the Chinese nation-state (at least insofar as these concerns exceed the repression of Tibetans within China's borders). In this sense, I seek to recover the stories of the odd migrants obscured by a normative focus on the figure of the refugee.

However, I also want to think about 'oddness' on a scale that transcends the stories of individuals. Here I refer to the People's Republic of China and trans-Himalayan Tibet as themselves 'odd neighbours' – tightly connected quasi-intimates whose legendary antagonism renders it almost impossible to consider other sorts of mutual interrelationships. Thus the degree that Tibetan trans-Himalayan sojourns were motivated in part by changing economic (rather than political or religious) conditions inside the PRC has stubbornly resisted analysis. This chapter is a necessarily provisional attempt to redress this oversight, by adding the dynamics of economic development in contemporary China to the landscape of multiple in-betweenesses that comprises what the editors of this volume might term the 'predicament of neighbouring' that trans-Himalayan Tibetan migrants must negotiate. A story from my fieldwork may help to make these points more concretely.

### A 'Neverland' in the Borderlands

The renovations were behind schedule and Gesar was antsy about how little headway his workers seemed to be making. A bundle of scarcely-contained

energy even when at rest, in his agitated state he now approached a super-human level of animation. He flitted from one set of workmen to another, supervising and fetching parts as needed. One moment found him cajoling the painter daubing at the dimly traced outlines of traditional motifs on the new reception counter. The next witnessed him haranguing the two men hopping precariously on a shoulder-high plank placed between two rickety-looking step ladders whose efforts to install two lighting fixtures were being impeded by some pernicky ceiling dry wall. Only when he had begun garrulously slapping the backs of the men sweeping debris from what had been previously been slick marble floors did he see that I had entered, pulling up short and hurrying over to greet me with his characteristic and infectious enthusiasm.

A few days previous, arriving in town in the summer of 2009 for the first time in almost three years, I had been surprised and somewhat alarmed to find the lobby of Gesar's hotel gutted.<sup>9</sup> I was initially concerned that Gesar had been forced to sell or gone out of business as a result of the town being closed to foreign tourists for over a year after the ethnic unrest of March, 2008. At that time, Tibetans all across China had risen in protest against central authorities, and the tide of dissent had sloshed all the way from Lhasa at the centre of the TAR to this far-flung outpost on the border of Han, Hui and Tibetan spheres of cultural influence. I had gotten down from the bus and walked across the street to the steps where Gesar and I had first met seven years before, only to find his hotel a cacophonous construction site swarming with unfamiliar faces. In short order, however, his wife spotted me as I peered in through an open window frame and she ran upstairs to fetch him. He came down looking tired, covered in the dust of renovation.

A few minutes later, smoking and chatting over cantaloupe in the spacious but modestly furnished owner's quarters, he described the aftermath of the events of the previous March. The last year and half had been hell he told me, even if things had been looking up recently. Business had taken a hit from the enforced absence of Westerners, his father-in-law had died (after which he had had to perform expensive and, to his anticlerical sensibility, pointless mourning rituals) and as if this were not enough, a needed and apparently unproblematic loan application had fallen through at the last moment forcing frantic alterations to the renovation plans. He noted that he had stayed open to this point on the custom provided by Chinese domestic tourists, explaining that he could not not take these Chinese tourists in – if

9 Pseudonym for both hotel and person; given continuing instability in the region I have also chosen to change the name of the town as well.

he didn't and one complained to the authorities, he'd be out of business 'like that!'

'Well, I have to behave, don't I?!' he said only half-jokingly. 'The police call me every week and ask me, "What have you been up to?" Plus, there are good and bad people in every group: Tibetans, Han, Muslims, Americans'. Indeed, he continued, when, a few years back he had grown increasingly frustrated with the unreliability and poor work habits of the tour guides (Tibetan like himself) who he employed in his horse trekking company, he had gone into business with a new partner, a Chinese tourist from Chengdu, a motivated and diligent worker, who he later found out was actually a Hui Muslim. When other Tibetans complained: 'You are such a Tibetan man, always supporting your culture and yet your partner is a Chinese?' Gesar stood his ground: 'He's honest, he works hard and is a good guy. I've never wanted to only serve Tibetans; I'll work with all kinds of honest people'.

Later after a meal with him and his family, Gesar rose from his chair said, 'Come on, Chris, let me show you something' and led me out into the street and pointed up to an as yet unfinished portion of the second floor. This, he said, gesturing grandly, is my future restaurant; if the loan had come through when it was supposed to, he would have added a third floor done up in traditional wooden architecture. Yet, despite the economies he had had to take, construction had plunged ahead undaunted. After this view from afar, he led me up the stairs for a tour. 'Remember? This used to be my lobby', he said as we passed through the halls of the hotel (then without showers or Western style toilets) in which I had first stayed in a cold December many winters before. In the half-built restaurant, there wasn't yet much to see but Gesar had all the details mapped out in his head. 'The chairs will be here', he proclaimed, pointing out the particular kind he had purchased in a photo album, 'the tables will be here, the kitchen here. After the tour he was quiet for a moment then pondered out loud, 'What should I call it? I think either "Black Tent" or "Neverland":<sup>10</sup>

As we stood surveying the still mostly nebulous prospect of this 'Neverland', a refurbishment and expansion planned in response to the rapid development of Tsatang as a (both domestic and foreign) tourist destination over the previous decade, I couldn't help but both ponder the theoretical 'neverland' inhabited by the economically successful returned Tibetan migrant in contemporary China and be reminded of the humbler but fortuitous circumstances of our meeting. On Christmas Day 2002, nearing the end of

10 Michael Jackson's passing had just occurred when this conversation took place. In the end, 'Black Tent' prevailed.

my first, preliminary, trip to what scholars used to call the Kansu-Tibet marches, I found myself, freezing and devoid of Western companionship, in what was then a tiny, rather isolated, and almost impossibly picturesque mountain village. Having resigned myself to spending the day watching herdsmen drive their yaks across the town's main bridge, I sat down on the concrete steps leading up to a storefront to smoke a cigarette and, finding that I had misplaced my lighter, asked the only other person sitting there – a Tibetan man with the long hair and heavy wool-lined cloak of a nomad – in Chinese for a light.

Much to my surprise, he replied to my request in perfect English ('of course') and asked me where I was from. We quickly fell into conversation and ended up spending the entire day together over several beers and numerous cigarettes. Gesar, was at first, my 'Christmas friend' as he put it. In our long, pleasant, boozy conversation that day I discovered that he had learned his English over the course of an extended stay in the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala. He had brought back from India a fierce anti-clericalism and a pragmatic approach to life in China – focusing not on political agitation but on improving educational opportunities for local Tibetans. His fluent English had allowed him to begin working as a tour guide in 1999. Within a decade, he had become the proprietor of a hotel (inherited from his father-in-law) and a successful horse trekking business (which he had built largely with his own sweat).

At the time, I didn't really know what to make of this situation. I took my Christmas friend to be a charming and unexpected aberration from what I assumed to be the usual patterns of Tibetan migration. I couldn't help wondering, 'What kind of Tibetan comes back from India?' I was intrigued but a little suspicious. Yet in retrospect, this meeting with (more than ten years on) my first friend in Tibet, seems incredibly fortuitous. Gesar's account was merely the first indication of the degree to which prior to the events of March 2008, Amdo Tibetans refused to stay put, or rather, of the degree to which Tibetan lives in what is now northwest China are lived on complex, often trans-national terrains. For, in the mid to late 2000s, Tibetans in and around Gannan Autonomous Prefecture, even those who had never ventured beyond the prefectural capital, lived their lives with a consciousness of the possibility of living those lives in important elsewhere: Lhasa, Dharamsala and the West. As such, the 'art of neighbouring' they practiced necessarily had to be responsive to the complexities of negotiating many betweenesses simultaneously.

I conceptualize neighbouring and the itineraries and subjectivities that both condition and are conditioned by it as emerging from multiple,

overlapping and often fraught relationships between proximate quasi-intimates. In such contexts, closeness in geographical or network space or apparent cultural or natural similarity is often belied by the complexity of the intermixtures of the familiar and the unknown revealed in practice. Further, if the word neighbour itself derives from a term denoting the practice or situation of dwelling nearby, in examining the Tibetan examples that follow, we can take neither dwelling (with its common associations of sedentarism, community, and stasis) nor proximity (in physical space) for granted. Instead I suggest below the necessity of treating neighbouring not as passive proximity in geographical space but as an active traversing of multiple scales and cartographies of proximity and un/familiarity at once – the physical barriers and conduits that link and divide China, Tibet and India, for example, different imaginings of China and Tibet, and even variant modes of enacting Tibetanness itself.

Gesar's example is representative enough despite its specificity. He had returned in 1999 after seven years in India only after the death of his brother and the increasingly poor health of his father prompted his family to ask him to come home. Returning as illicitly<sup>11</sup> as he had gone, he brought with him both the sterling English that had so surprised me and an intense suspicion of organized religion. Yet his fierce anti-clericalism had not diminished the level of official scrutiny he had received since returning. He joked, wryly, about his being subject to long-term surveillance after his return that, 'the communist party had me in their heart; I had my own bodyguard for eight years'. Instead of political agitation or religious meditation, his continuing passion since his return had been the sponsorship of quality primary and secondary education for local Tibetans that would allow them to get ahead economically in today's China. (That his schools were forced to close in the aftermath of the March 2008 protests was personally devastating).

At the time of our first meeting I still naively assumed that anyone who had braved the treacherous and illicit journey across the Himalayas to the religious and cultural freedoms of exile Tibetan communities in India and Nepal would most likely be tempted to stay on on the Sub-continent – both because of the effort expended in the process and on some level, I then

11 For many, the return journey is no less dangerous than the outward leg. Another of my first friends in Tibet, Yeshe, a monk from near Zhuoni, narrowly managed to avoid jail time when at the last minute he postponed his return trip, going to Calcutta to meet a high lama instead. The friend with whom he had planned to travel was stopped near the border soon after entering China and thrown in prison when a search of his luggage revealed a tiny but nonetheless damning copy of the Tibetan flag.



thought, because this was just what Tibetans *did*. Thus both his story and the presence of a sizeable population of returned Tibetans in Amdo both affronted my expectations about what Tibetans should want and do and posed a thorny problem to think through anthropologically. It was clear from my interactions with returned Tibetans that they occupied a particularly fraught space between the moral destinations of Chinese nationalism and orthodox projects of Tibetanness amongst Tibetans in exile. Close to but not quite isomorphic with China, India and non-migrant Tibetan populations, they found themselves confronting multiple proximate un/familiar others on borderlands that were often more imagined than geographic. Moreover, their presence unsettled the usual kinds of stories that people (Western and Tibetan, Scholars and lay folk) tell about the uncomfortable position of Tibet and its people within the contemporary PRC. In these stories there is a term for Tibetans who attempt to leave China illicitly with hopes of making it to the exile communities of north India and elsewhere – ‘refugees’. And certainly many of the returned Tibetans I encountered in Amdo, initially thought of their own journeys in these terms.

But becoming a refugee, taking refuge, is premised on a particular, deferred relationship to the notion or promise of an eventual return. The arc of a refugee’s journey is tied to wider geo-political circumstances. A return is promised, but it is deferred until the conflict or calamity that has resulted in the refugee’s displacement, their up-rooting, has been resolved. Until such a resolution occurs or is made to occur, taking refuge is a waiting game fraught with uncertainties and the journey of the refugee is a one-way ticket. I don’t wish to downplay or denigrate the travails, hopes or extremities of duress that Tibetans who would or do label themselves as refugees have experienced. Instead I want to suggest the at least provisional necessity of stepping back from a perspective where the figure of the refugee colours all knowledge production about the trans-Himalayan peregrinations of contemporary PRC-born Tibetans.<sup>12</sup> In a post 3/14 world in which the ‘Tibet Question’ remains simmeringly unsettled, what do we make of the refugee who goes back (Long and Oxfeld 2004)? How do we begin to reckon with this unexpected trajectory of Tibetan migration – *from* India (and Nepal) *to* China in a way that doesn’t end up likening it to driving the wrong way down a one-way street?

12 This point should not be construed as minimizing the struggles of Tibetans who so identify, or as endorsing the lack of legal (as opposed to theoretical) refugee status that makes the lives of Tibetans living in and traveling to Nepal so fraught with danger and difficulty.

## *Uprooting the Refugee*

This question is of particularly pressing importance in the Tibetan case for two reasons that have very much to do with the special status of the refugee in discussions of trans-national Tibetan culture. I will present these reasons briefly before discussing each in turn in more depth. First, in contrast to the usual state of affairs in the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1997 [1992]), in the Tibetan case the refugee is seen as normative rather than aberrant. Second, this normative status of the refugee is premised upon a hard and fast separation between Tibetan journeying practices and the recent political and economic transformations of the contemporary Chinese nation-state. Below, I critique both of these propositions arguing that while refugee subjectivities remain important to trans-national Tibetans' self-conceptions, visions of taking refuge neither completely capture Tibetan itineraries of the last few decades nor do they adequately describe contemporary Tibetan returnees' subjective assessments of their complex interstitiality-cum-neighbourliness. Refugees, in other words, are only part of the story.

Further, mistaking them for the entirety of the story has led scholars working on Tibetan mobilities to habitually ignore the degree to which such sojourns may be shaped in important ways by China's rapid economic development. The tendency has thus been to overlook the degree to which both Tibetan journeys and returns are occasioned and conditioned by agonistic intimacies of China and Tibet rather than by their separation. The emphasis of religious over economic factors in Tibetan migrations may be a mark of just how ironclad the common sense that scripts Tibetan journey as always already separate from Chinese development has become. Indeed, it took me several years after my return from the field to make the connection between the two.

I did so by realizing the fallacy of two common assumptions. The first of these is that Tibetans always travel for Tibetan reasons which are always already not Chinese. This claim is belied by the intimacy of the links between the multi-ethnic Chinese nation-state (and its discontents) and both Chinese and Tibetan transnationalism (cf. Tuttle 2007, Vasantkumar 2012). The second specious assumption takes the form of the analogy China is to economy as Tibet is to religion. While this may once have been true at a very general level, it has not held water for at least the decade plus that has elapsed since the beginning of the Great Western Development Scheme (under the auspices of which Tibetan religion itself became a key attraction for the tourist dollars needed to catalyse regional development). Ultimately, I have concluded that despite the over-determined politics of culture that

alternately script Tibetan as separate from both Westerner and Chinese (Adams 1996) or try to reconstruct Tibetan returns to China as 'Chinese' sojourns (Vasantkumar 2012), in practice, Tibetan motivations for migration are as likely to be as much economic as religious.

It should be noted that this mutual implication of 'economic' and 'religious' factors differs not so much from traditional practices of pilgrimage which could incorporate both as it does from received Western wisdom about the spiritual purity of traditional Tibetan culture (and by extension of the journeys undertaken under its auspices). Further, in some sense, despite the fact that Tibetans' trans-Himalayan peregrinations run counter to the usual itineraries of Chinese development (from the country to the city, from the western hinterlands to the wealthy urban centres of the eastern seaboard),<sup>13</sup> it is hard to avoid the creeping sense that any analysis of such itineraries that does not link them to China's rapid economic development is incomplete. Let us attempt to redress, at least provisionally, this incompleteness.

Drawing on the work of scholars such as James Clifford (1988, 1997) and Liisa Malkki (1997 [1992]), anthropologists, critical human geographers and practitioners of other allied disciplines have, in recent years, paid increasing attention to the ways in which national belonging is given shape not only by deeply rooted notions of autochthony or primordial identity, but also by particular *routes* of patterned movement that both tie the component parts of nation-states together into provisionally coherent wholes but also, commonly, exceed or cross-cut the cartographic boundaries of the nation-states in question. This shift in emphasis has taken place in concert with the growth of anthropological inquiries that actively question teleological narratives of the nation-state, inquiries that supplement attention to the eternal verities of nationalist discourse with an attention to the contingent, ongoing production of senses of belonging on both national and transnational scales. By looking at the patterns of movement that performatively constitute people's subjective apprehensions of being 'native to the nation', anthropologists have been able to cast some critical light on the predominantly 'sedentarist metaphysics' (Malkki 1997 [1992]) through which national forms are usually imagined and, further, have illuminated

13 Although several informants mentioned in 2007 that many more local Tibetans were migrating to Beijing (thanks to ease of employment in the run up to the Olympics) than heading to India, my research has led me to believe that such travels are either not very common (only one of my informants had a close friend studying or working in Beijing) or not commonly discussed. By contrast I ran into many Tibetans who had been to India, knew friends or relatives who had been, or wanted to go and talked about such aspirations or experiences freely.

the trans-national structures of belonging and community with which national projects are complexly bound up. Routes have been placed along roots in scholarly attempts to understand belonging in the 'national order of things' (see Vasantkumar 2013 for a more detailed discussion of related themes).

Malkki has famously described the 'sedentarist' and 'arborescent' metaphors of culture that characterize this national order and that lead in many cases to displacement as being cast as aberrant – as an uprooting, the consequences of which have historically included the marginalization of refugees and other mobile populations that exist in the national order's interstices. Yet while Malkki's interventions are justly famous for providing trenchant ethnographic illustration of Anderson (1991) and Clifford's (1988) placing mobility at the heart of (more-than-)national belonging, the Tibetan case highlights the limits of her claim that the refugee is necessarily a marginal figure. Quite to the contrary, Moran (2004) acutely notes that in the Tibetan context, rather than being a stigmatized, deracinated or uprooted Other to an authentic, territorially grounded envisioning of nation or culture, the refugee is, instead, central to contemporary articulations of authentic Tibetan culture. According to many of trans-national Tibet's strongest supporters, both Tibetan and Western alike, 'Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism now function fully and perfectly only in Diaspora' (Moran 2004: 188).

In this instance, therefore, it is the rooted (or more precisely for returnees, the rerooted) that is aberrant, the uprooted normative. Moran explains

The rather different semiotic valence of the 'Tibetan refugee'. It is as if, by the magic inherent in this particular geographic qualifier, the categorization of refugee is stood on its head. The Tibetan refugee does come to stand for his or her nation in absentia, carrying the culture as legacy and as precious cargo. Further, within the world of popular media representations (as well as many Tibetans' own estimations), this cargo is in fact their gift to the world. Tibetans are not usually portrayed as 'rootless' or as stripped of the aura that surrounds their nation-culture; in fact, quite the reverse. (Moran 2004: 189)

If Tibetan refugees reverse (or benefit from a reversal of) the usual terms of the national order of things (even if this symbolic valorisation is of very little assistance in traversing the fraught terrains of national borders and geopolitical struggle), it follows that they also reverse the dialectic of visibility and invisibility that Malkki links to this order. Whereas in Malkki's

account, 'refugees are rendered 'systematically invisible' (Moran 2004: 189), in the Tibetan case of which I write, it is mobile non-refugee Tibetans that are rendered invisible (non-mobile Tibetans in China are arguably rendered inauthentic rather than invisible, but this is a topic for another paper). Aberrance here is figured not in terms of the uprooting of sedentary authenticities but as the *uprooting* (if you will) of authentic itineraries wherein returning is tantamount to selling out.

## Pilgrims of Development

Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that Tibetans who (return) migrate trans-nationally in search not only of refuge but also of fortune – Tibetans, in other words, who become pilgrims of development – are necessarily co-opted by or complicit in Chinese national projects. While most necessarily swear off explicit political expression, most also have no illusions about the contradictions, injustices and inequalities of everyday life in China. Indeed, some, like Gesar, seek to lay the foundation for a future Tibet of their own imagining that diverges from both China and exile Tibetan ideals. In place of the over-determined binaries of the Tibet Question as phrased by both interested parties (whether cast in terms of the struggle on the part of virtuous communists to free Tibetan serfs from their evil monastic overlords or as a confrontation between the peaceful partisans of Buddhist enlightenment and the destructive, rapacious Chinese nation-state) the situation on the ground is complexly polyvalent (cf. Powers 2004). What should we then make of Tibetan modernists who return to China to work as guides for foreign tourists, showing them the remains of traditional Tibetan culture even as they themselves seek modernity on Tibetan terms and critically assess the essentialist claims of both Chinese and Tibetan nationalisms? 'Refugee' will not suffice to describe such travellers.

Those who stay, those who go and those who return all do so for a variety of reasons. This should not be surprising, but, perhaps, it still is. It also shouldn't be scandalous to admit that for at least some of the Tibetans involved that economics may trump (or exist alongside) religion or politics, that for some at least, travel to India is undertaken at least in part for instrumental reasons – to parlay English language ability into superior economic prospects (and perhaps laterally support for Tibetan education, culture or language) in China. As the iron rice bowl of China under socialism has given way to the new post-WTO world of risk and self-reliance, Amdo Tibetans, in addition to perceiving themselves as cultural and religious

minorities (who prior to 2008 were able to access rather more freedom on those counts than Tibetans in the TAR; times have since rather radically changed), also internalized, to some degree, ideas of economic and cultural backwardness common to those hailing from underdeveloped rural regions in China's western hinterland (cf. Vasantkumar 2014).

As the Chinese central government has, at least formally, turned its attention to the development of the Western Regions (starting in particular in 2000), local governments have been given some control over assessing how best to employ locally specific resources to foster economic development (under the auspices for example of the maxim 'develop locally specific economy [i.e. resources]', *fazhan tese jingji* 发展特色经济). Prior to 2008, tourism was, alongside such industries as forestry and mineral extraction, perhaps the idiom par excellence for this locally specific development. Places like Lhasa in the TAR, Lijiang in Yunnan, Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan and ever more widely scattered locales like Xiahe, Tsatang, Langmusi, Repgong, Ganzi, Dege, and Yushu all began to figure with some prominence on the itineraries of Western tourists (and since 2008, with as yet unclear consequences, in the journeys of a new breed of Chinese backpackers (see Lim 2009, Shepherd 2009, Vasantkumar 2009). In this era of expanding western tourism, Tibetans with English language proficiency were ideally positioned to serve as guides.<sup>14</sup>

This positioning was in no small part due to the confluence between their ethnicity (Tibetans are generally seen by Westerners as more authentic and less politically compromised guides to Tibetan Buddhist monuments than Han Chinese) and their linguistic aptitude (most Western tourists speak only European languages). Given the generally lousy state of English language instruction in Western China in the late 2000s, access to English in India was, for many migrants (both potential and returned) one of the most appealing aspects of the entire endeavour. This is not to say that these economic motives always trumped or replaced more purely nationalist or religious motives, often all three were present in different measure. (Even the most strongly anti-clerical migrants I met, two young Tibetan men who separately praised the Cultural Revolution, only wishing that the Tibetans

14 Further, most if not all of the Tibetans I talked to in Dharamsala had friends or knew of others who had returned to China and achieved at a modicum of economic success. In 2007, one Tibetan in Dharamsala told me that outside of Lhasa where supervision of returnees is usually strict and occasionally draconian as when in 2004 many returnees were booted from their jobs in tourism-related industries for the crime of having visited India, he knew of many people who had gone back and were doing alright working as guides, English teachers or entrepreneurs.

had been able to control it in their own territory, still expressed reverence for the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in general).

Certainly, the journey itself to and from India was and remains extraordinarily dangerous. Just as certainly some Tibetans would no doubt undertake such travels even if there were no access to free education in the exile communities. Yet, I still believe that a portrait of Tibetan migrants that casts them firmly and solely in refugee mode is less a description of the actual itineraries on the ground than a reproduction of a particular spatialized cultural politics of difference in which Tibetan is scripted as always already separate from Chinese.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not economic motivations for such movements are essential or incidental, it would be advisable, I suggest, to consider contemporary Tibetan trans-Himalayan migrations as proceeding from a complex amalgam of economic, cultural, religious and political motivations. In such an amalgamation, the economic advantages *in China* provided by English language education in Tibetan exile communities abroad should not be overlooked. Whether, in order to add nuance to our understandings of trans-Himalayan Tibetan migration, we should alternately abandon, decentre, or employ the category of refugee as strategic essentialism will thus no doubt occasion significant debate.

## Odd Migrants

I suggest that in order to start to make sense of the figure of the returned Tibetan we need to begin by broadening our analytic terminology. In place of the term 'refugees' and its over-determining connotations, which are apropos to many but not all Tibetan populations and in place of the descriptive, but strangely flat 'returnees', I propose the term 'odd migrants'. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, I am using the word 'odd' in a somewhat technical sense that, following Hartigan, is meant to highlight both the singularity of and the significant internal cleavages within the population I attempt to describe. For, the category of Tibetan returnees is riven by differences of class, region and language that parallel the

15 Which, it should be noted, exists uncomfortably alongside other mappings (such as the common equation by long-term Tibetan residents of Dharamsala of new arrivals with the cultural and moral orientation of the Chinese nation-state. The bitter irony to find having sacrificed so much to leave China that one is tarred with accusations of complicity with the PRC upon arrival in India, might be another example of the normalization of the figure of the refugee (here equated only with those who left China in 1959 or shortly after) in an exile Tibetan context.

significant discontinuities Hartigan highlights that make it so difficult to think different sorts of American Whiteness together. Two groups of returnees are particularly 'odd' in this sense.

These two groups can be effectively distinguished by their reasons for returning, their welcome (or lack thereof) upon return and by the sorts of conceptual limits these reasons and receptions render manifest. The first of these two odd groups is a population of young PRC-born Amdowas, both ecclesiastical and lay, most often, but not exclusively male who venture to India for religious or practical instruction (e.g., learning English) motivated by a general sense of dissatisfaction with life in China's Tibet(s) that derives only partially from some sort of ethno-national or religious sense of marginalization. These migrants have travelled both to and from India in some less-than-licit manner, sneaking across snowy passes 'like thieves in the night' as one of my friends put it, toughing it out in Ngari or dodging border posts down in the misty valleys near Dram. This sort of migrant is no longer feted upon his or her return, but instead goes to a local police station, turns themselves in and, depending on their degree of *guanxi* and the corruptness of the police, pays a fine of varying severity and slips back into the general stream of social life (with perhaps, as in Gesar's case, a bodyguard in tow).

The return of even average Tibetans used to occasion considerably more positive official attention than it does today. My friends in Labrang told me that the local government used to hold galas to welcome back *guiguo zangzu tongbao* 归国藏族同胞 or 'Returned Tibetan Compatriots' and I have seen pictures in friends' apartments of gatherings of smiling returnees posing beneath red banners with this phrase picked out in gold characters. For the most part, however, Tibetan returnees have grown so common place<sup>16</sup> that the government has become perhaps just a little *blasé* about them. Or perhaps it has to do with changing definitions of *guiguo* (归国). *Gui* (归), has the connotations of returning home having made good for oneself while away – it in this sense describes a return that casts both the returner and the place of return in a positive light. Where once even the return of farm boys or long haired nomads was viewed in this light, in the years immediately preceding 2008, it seemed that to occasion the kinds of feting now prevalent in the development-minded PRC, as with so many other things in contemporary China, one, as it were, has to pay to play. This is where the second group of odd migrants comes in.

16 By 1998, China had 'welcomed' the visits of 22,935 Tibetans visiting relatives and more than 2200 returning from abroad to settle down (China Tibet Information Center 2007).



Here I refer to a smaller and generally more affluent substrate of the Tibetan population who have the means and material resources at their command to be feted as ‘foreign investors’ or who have the life story to allow them to be deployed for propagandistic purposes as the heroes (or more rarely heroines) of idealized success stories, as having achieved what might, for lack of a better phrase, be termed ‘China’s Tibetan Dream’.<sup>17</sup> In the years prior to the troubles of 2008, five such idealized biographies of returnees could be easily located on the website for the China Tibet Information Center.<sup>18</sup>

These accounts served as exemplifications of opportunity and self-improvement. These five vignettes which all feature a truly baffling system for romanizing Chinese versions of Tibetan names were entitled ‘Yixi Dainbgyai Takes the Lead in Becoming Rich’, ‘Dainzeng Wangdu, an Exemplary Village Head’, ‘Goisam Paintog – A Famous Tibetan Doctor’, ‘Zhaxi Wangdu, a Deputy to the Lhasa Municipal People’s Congress’ and ‘Gyaincain Qoinpe – Member of the Lhasa Municipal Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference’. All the individuals in question hail from central Tibet and are members of the generation of Tibetans who fled the TAR in the 1950s; they are, in other words, as the purple prose of the website puts it, ‘approaching the evenings of their lives’. All returned to Tibet between 1982 and 1987.

While sharing certain formulaic aspects, flight into exile, disillusionment, tearful returns, described in purplest prose – Dainzeng Wangdu for example is said to remark, ‘After my return to the motherland it was as if I were a parched seed [sic] which had suddenly been drenched with sweet dew’, and concluding homilies on the virtues of the party – these vignettes highlight the different modes in which returnees can make good. Yeshe Dhonjub (at least I think that’s how one might render Yixi Dainbgyai) by virtue of his own considerable talents and preferential government investment and taxation policies is able to parlay his small timber concern into a diversified business empire in Tsethang. Tenzin Wangdu illustrates how Tibetans in China can gain control over their own affairs by assuming positions of power in local government. Kelsang Phuntsok demonstrates that traditional arts such as Tibetan medicine are not only allowed to flourish in today’s open-minded China but can become in themselves sources of

17 Given the avidity with which ‘China’ is inserted into Tibet-related titles (e.g., ‘Tin Tin in China’s Tibet’ and ‘China’s Tibetan Mastiff’ just to name two).

18 [http://www.tibetinfo.com/en/reports/ordinary/returned/ret\\_menu.htm](http://www.tibetinfo.com/en/reports/ordinary/returned/ret_menu.htm) (website deactivated).

wealth and social esteem. Finally, Jashi Wangdu and Tenzin Jigme show that Tibetans even have access to higher levels of Chinese government: ‘as spokespersons for the people, they actively participate in the administration and discussion of state affairs’.

## Conclusion: Odd Neighbours

I think we should take these vignettes neither as representing the actual experiences of actual individuals nor as completely fictitious, but rather as something akin to, say, a movie ‘based’ on a book by the same name – actualities embellished and repurposed for particular ends – here the United Front attempt to hail overseas Tibetans as one of the key constituencies of the Chinese nation-state. That is to say simply because these accounts stretch credibility or bear the all-too-telltale marks of formalism or because Goisam Paintog crops up at least once as the protagonist of what is supposed to be Dainzeng Wangdu’s story, that does not mean we should conclude that the phenomenon of wealthy and successful Tibetan returnees does not exist, or the interests of such returnees do not sometimes coincide with official envisionings. Just as the strange romanizations distance us but allow us to perceive dimly actual Tibetan names, these formalized accounts similarly allow us distanced, filtered access to actual Tibetan lives even as the medium itself makes it impossible to overlook their repurposing.

Further, even though these exemplary biographies of returned Tibetans made good don’t fully coincide with the details of their lives, they can be seen as a significant manifestation of government policy towards potential trans/national co-uterines. They seek to emphasize a co-nascence that highlights Tibetan compatriots’ place in the Chinese national-family. These and other returned Tibetans made good may or may not be foreign born but have found themselves sucked (or have manoeuvred themselves) into the vortex of new forms of nationally-inflected trans-national structures of feeling which the PRC seeks to mobilize. Further projects of economic and ‘social’ development in what are commonly perceived to be backward minority regions hail the so-called ‘Overseas Tibetans Compatriots’ as ‘a potential subset of *Huaqiao* (华侨) or ‘Overseas Chinese’ and an underutilized source of the ‘foreign investment’ central to plans for (for example) developing the West (see Vasantkumar 2012, for a more detailed treatment of one of these ‘Overseas Tibetans’).

Yet despite the important differences between these celebrated and fictionalized Tibetan returnees and the invisible, illicit ones with whom

we began this chapter, it is worth reflecting on one further valence of neighbouring as I have tried to employ it in this chapter – the fact that the boundaries between the two may not be absolute. The motivations of the wealthy investors may be as much religious as economic, the poorer returnees may have initially travelled in hopes of improving their economic status in China. (Indeed the boundary between the economic and the religious often breaks down on closer inspection). The experience of trans-national, trans-Himalayan migration even in its most illicit form can, as Gesar's experiences so boldly illustrate, itself be productive of class mobility. Such complexities highlight the degree to which economically and religiously motivated Tibetans are in Hartigan's terms, precisely odd, given that they are so hard to hold together conceptually. What this oddness in turn suggests, I argue, less as a conclusion than as a jumping off point for further study is that in place of, or at the very least in addition to understandings of these Amdowas' trans-Himalayan peregrinations as a sort of spatialized *Cri-de-Coeur*, stemming from a monolithic Chinese anti-Tibetanness, we as scholars must seek to treat them as more complex phenomena that both bind together and produce economic, political and moral terrains in novel and unpredictable combinations. Moreover, in this reimagining, Tibetan mobilities and Chinese economic development are themselves revealed as odd neighbours.

## 8 'China is Paradise'

Fortune and Refuge, Brokers and Partners, or the Migration Trajectories of Burmese Muslims toward the Yunnan Borderlands

*Renaud Egreteau\**

### Introduction: The Road *from* Mandalay

Syed Islam,<sup>1</sup> a young Muslim in his mid-twenties, likes to boast about his epic journey from Myanmar (formerly Burma)<sup>2</sup> to Ruili, a bustling Chinese market town located in southern Yunnan, right at the Burmese border. Born and raised in Myanmar's western Rakhine (formerly Arakan) State, he left his hometown a couple of years ago, and illegally crossed into Bangladesh. There, he bought a flight ticket and flew from Dhaka to Bangkok. Once in Thailand, local friends helped him travel by bus to Mae Sot, on the Thai-Myanmar border, where he sneaked back into Myanmar, and made it to Yangon. From the former Burmese capital, which he could not directly reach from his native Rakhine State because of government travel restrictions, he made the journey northwards to the cities of Mandalay and Lashio, and then entered Yunnan a few days later.

Syed Islam is not alone in making this arduous journey from western Myanmar to China. Wandering in the streets of Ruili (or Shweli in Burmese), one cannot overlook the presence of South Asian-looking shopkeepers and the local success of Bollywood movies. The bearded and dark-skinned men wearing *longyis* (Burmese sarong) and *topis* (Muslim prayer cap), chewing

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1 In this chapter, all names of informants have been changed to protect their anonymity. In Myanmar, 'U' is a designation of respect for elder men, and 'Daw' for women.

2 For linguistic simplicity and without any political connotation, this chapter uses the English adjectives 'Burmese' and 'Burman'. 'Burmese' refers to the citizenship and common language of the people of present-day Myanmar, while 'Burman' more specifically designates the ethnic *Bamar* majority of the country, where non-Burman ethnic minorities, such as the Karens, Kachins, Mons, Rohingyas, and so on, also dwell. Myanmar is the country's official post-1989 appellation, and admitted as such henceforth. Yangon is the vernacular term for the English Rangoon. The Rakhine State was known as the Arakan State until 1989.

betel nut and smoking *cheroots* (Burmese cigars), belong to Muslim communities that have immigrated from Myanmar over the past two decades. Almost exclusively Sunni, and distinct from the local Chinese Muslim communities (the 'Hui' 回, also colloquially known as 'Panthay' in the Burmese language), these 'Burmese Muslims' have since the late 1980s established extensive networks of trade and set up successful gem and jade businesses, grocery stores, restaurants and cosmetic shops in a few major cities of Southwestern Yunnan. This chapter explores their remarkable history of migration in the context of a booming borderworld. It draws on fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2012 in Ruili, Jiegao, and Baoshan – three bustling Chinese commercial towns located along the historical 'Burma Road' that has connected, since it was built in the late 1930s, the Burmese city of Mandalay and Kunming, Yunnan's capital. It seeks to understand why and how Burmese Muslims have been venturing northwards, while the dominant trend of migration rather points southwards, from Yunnan into resource-rich Myanmar.

From the mid-1980s indeed, the geopolitical configuration of Myanmar's northern areas has significantly changed. For decades, several armed groups had acted as powerful buffers between Myanmar and its northern Chinese neighbour. Since the 1960s, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA, formed in 1961) and other ethnic armed militias controlled most of the trafficking routes, resources and movements of people in the Sino-Burmese borderlands (Lintner 1999). However, when in the 1980s Beijing decided to withdraw its moral and financial support to Burmese communist insurgents, these buffer territories began to vanish. Under Deng Xiaoping's guidance, China was entering a new era. Maintaining stability in the region and opening a door to booming Southeast Asia, including Myanmar, became a key element of Deng's approach. This shift in Chinese policy coincided with the regime change in Yangon in 1988 and the advent of a supposedly more liberal military junta ready to end the country's isolation. Amidst the Burmese pro-democracy uprising of August 1988, a border trade agreement was signed between China and the Burmese authorities; bilateral commerce subsequently flourished (Lintner 1989, 1994). Yunnanese merchants, investors, and fortune-seekers began to flood into northern Myanmar and Mandalay, the long-standing centre of the Burmese gem and jade business.

An extensive and growing literature has focused on the massive flows of Chinese immigration into Myanmar, along the 'Road to Mandalay', as Kipling's poem goes.<sup>3</sup> This body of scholarship has early on highlighted the

3 Whilst he never set foot in the former Burmese royal capital, Rudyard Kipling wrote in 1890 an acclaimed poem entitled 'Mandalay'. It narrates how a British soldier stationed in colonial

Figure 8.1 Map of China-Myanmar Borderlands



Design: Renaud Egretreau and Bertrand Lefebvre, 2005-2010

Burma longs for a young Burmese girl. After 1885 and the annexation of Upper Burma, British troops were continuously taken up on the Irrawaddy River from Rangoon to Mandalay, or the slow and never-ending 'Road to Mandalay'.

increasing economic dominance of Yunnanese migrants in Myanmar since the early 1990s, and the resentment this has generated among Burmese local populations (Mya Maung 1994, Seekins 1997, Le Bail and Tournier 2010, Zin 2012). However, little has been written about migratory flows in the opposite direction: from Myanmar into China, on the 'Road *from* Mandalay'.

Based on ethnographic research on both Burmese migrants who arrived recently in Yunnan and well-settled Burmese shopkeepers, this study argues that two main driving forces have pushed and pulled them, respectively, toward China. The first is economic: the search for better job opportunities and the prospect of a thriving business environment have attracted many Burmese to a booming Yunnan province since the late 1980s. Myanmar's gem and jade industry, with which Burmese and Chinese Muslim communities have a long history of association, is most notable in this respect. Surging demand from Chinese consumers in the 1990s fostered a new type of Burmese economic migration northwards and the Burmese Muslims are ideally positioned to use and expand their diasporic networks as well as their brokerage skills across the Chinese borders. In the process, the Chinese borderlands have been transformed into a wider transnational space, interconnected with the rest of the world, and in which Burmese Muslim 'middlemen', as neighbours and brokers, feel very much at ease.

The second driving force is the search for refuge. Muslim communities have long been the target of patronizing and discriminating treatment in Myanmar – by the postcolonial state authorities, the police, as well as local Buddhist populations. Persecution has been especially rampant in the Rakhine State and in central Myanmar. Scores of Burmese Muslims have therefore looked for safer places to practice their religion and negotiate their own Islamic identity. Intriguingly, China, and Yunnan in particular, offered a far more benign environment than Myanmar. There, across the borders, Burmese Muslim migrants have found a much sought-after sanctuary. In this process of seeking fortune and religious refuge, this chapter will then show, the Burmese Muslim migrants have engaged in active and positive 'neighbouring' in the borderworld along the southern edges of Yunnan. This borderworld offers them a site where they can safely prosper. In the local Chinese business world they are 'useful neighbours', or in Chirot and Reid's (1997) words, 'essential outsiders'.

In this chapter, I will first briefly outline the historical origin, role and middlemen position of the various Muslim communities inhabiting Myanmar. I will then trace their migration to China arguing that they moved northwards in search of both a safe haven and an 'El Dorado' where

professional opportunities lacking in Myanmar have mushroomed since the late 1980s. Finally, I will analyse how they have, in the process, become 'essential outsiders' in their new home in the Sino-Burmese border areas as brokers, partners, and neighbours.

### **Historical Background: Indian and Muslim Middlemen in Colonial and Early Post-Colonial Burma**

In Myanmar, Indian migrants, whether Hindu, Sikh or Muslim, have long acted as intermediaries between state authorities (in a colonial and early postcolonial context) and the Burmese population (Mahajani 1960; Chakravarti 1971). Similar to Chinese, Armenian, and Jewish communities worldwide, Indians have long been examined through the lens of the 'middlemen minority', a theoretical corpus much used by social scientists from the 1970s, which has since evolved into an extensive multi-disciplinary scholarship (Bonacich 1973, Schaffer et al. 2009). Middlemen commonly act as 'go-between' agents who broker between dominant interest groups, the state and the local people. They often migrate into spaces where they can offer a valuable role as intermediaries and are in a position to mobilize assets and provide goods or services unavailable locally. As minorities, they subsequently form ethnic enclaves (Light et al. 1994) or immigrant niches (Waldinger 1994), in which they can perform brokering and networking activities. Highly mobile, they frequently master several languages and use their own ethnicity-based networks for communication, trade, knowledge exchange and circulation. They demonstrate much flexibility in collecting capital and mobilizing their own kin labour forces. But they maintain cultural practices distinct from those of the locals – and tend to therefore be more or less segregated from their host societies. They remain 'outsiders' (Chirot and Reid 1997, Nyíri 2011), but their presence as intermediaries and their brokerage skills are much needed and hardly replaceable.

The British colonial enterprise bolstered a massive flow of Indian immigrants into the Burmese province from the late the nineteenth century. Tamils, Marwaris, Bengalis, Biharis, Chettiars and others migrated first to the coastal areas of Arakan and Tenasserim, then to Rangoon and the Irrawaddy delta, and eventually to Mandalay and the northern areas after the Burmese territories were completely incorporated into the British 'Raj' in 1886. Familiar with British commercial and administrative practices, the colonial legal system as well as the English language, they managed to prosper as trustworthy brokers. They expanded their networks throughout the



colonial province, especially in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and helped establish new connections with their northern Chinese neighbour.<sup>4</sup>

About half of the Indian migrants brought by the British were Sunni Muslims. Their descendants now form the largest group among the three to four million Muslims in Myanmar today (Mahajani 1960, Chakravarti 1971, Yegar 1972, Khin Maung Kyi 2006, Taylor 2006, Egreteau 2011). The second largest group of Burmese Muslims are the Rohingyas, a segregated Sunni minority originated from the swampy borders between Bangladesh and Myanmar's Rakhine State. Although Burmese Buddhists consider them to be Bengali immigrants, their Islamic practices are now very different from the ones observed in South Asia in general, and in the Bengal region in particular (Yegar 2002, Defert 2007, Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2008). The Rohingyas, a community of about a million today, mostly live in the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderlands, but some also settled in Mandalay, Yangon and Mawlamyaing (formerly Moulmein) in the southeast of Myanmar.<sup>5</sup>

In the late colonial era, the immigrated Indians acquired a disproportionate influence in the economy, security forces and administration of the Burmese colonial province (Khin Maung Kyi 2006, Egreteau 2011). Their success triggered strong Indophobic sentiments among local Burmese communities. Resentment against the '*Kalās*' (or 'foreigners from the West' in Burmese language) was far more blatant at the time than against any other 'outsiders', including the Chinese minorities (Khin Maung Kyi 2006, Egreteau 2011: 35-36). After Myanmar's Independence in 1948, extensive 'Burmanization' programs were launched by the Burmese postcolonial state. Strict restrictions on acquiring Burmese citizenship and the outright xenophobic policies later defined by General Ne Win's military regime further drove scores of foreign and non-Buddhist communities out of the country in the 1960s. Muslims, in particular, were forced to assimilate to the Burman-dominated society if they wished to stay in Myanmar (Khin Khin Su 1954, Holmes 1967, Yegar 1972). Clashes between Buddhists and the

4 Their role as interpreters and informants to Chinese Hui jade merchants and mule caravan leaders traveling from Yunnan throughout Myanmar has recently been examined by Lehmann (2007) and Ma (2003).

5 Besides Burmese Muslims of Indian origins and Rohingyas, there are two other Muslim groups in Myanmar. First, the Zerbadees, or descendants of Arab, Indian or Persian traders who have intermarried with local Burmese since the 13th or 14th centuries. They form a small but rather well-assimilated community in Myanmar (Yegar 1972, 33-35, Khin Maung Yin 2005: 169, Berlie 2008: 11-12, Sulaiman 2008). And second, the Hui (Chinese Muslims) from Yunnan who have long-standing trade relations in the region. The Hui, or Panthay in Burmese, have also been well documented (Yegar 1966b, Forbes 1986, Atwill 2003, Ma 2003, Chang 2003, Sun 2011).

Indian and Muslim minorities have been a recurrent feature of Myanmar's history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular in the 1930s and during the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945. During the 1970s and 1980s, various 'de-Islamization' programs were also put in place by the Burmese military administration (Yegar 2002, Berlie 2008). Mosques have been burnt down and not allowed to be rebuilt by the local or state authorities ever since. Negative portrayal and stereotypes of Islam still linger. In 2012 and 2013, riots against Muslim populations in western and central Myanmar spread once more with particular severity. Many were led by Buddhist monks (Human Rights Watch 2012, 2013).

Whilst several key post-independence Burmese politicians and leading intellectuals were Muslims, the country's various Islamic communities have since the 1960s tended to adopt a far lower public profile at the national level. Enacted in 1982, Myanmar's latest Citizenship Law purported to strengthen the 1948 Citizenship Act. It still has legal power and has long been a major cause of resentment among the country's Muslim communities. The law has indeed created three categories of citizens: full, associate and naturalized. It states that any individual unable to prove that his or her ancestors settled in what is Myanmar today before 1823 (and thus, before the first Anglo-Burmese war and the first waves of labor migration from British India) would not be recognized as full Burmese citizens (Taylor 2006: 675-680). Consequently, Burmese of Indian origins, whether Hindus, Sikhs or Muslims were, and still are, openly singled out as second-class citizens. Many have been repatriated back to India or Pakistan since the 1960s. After several decades of Burmanization, most of those who remain in Myanmar have become more or less forcibly integrated; they have adopted Burmese names and language (*Myanma-sa*), and acquired the associate or naturalized status. One notable exception is the Rohingya community. A handful of its leaders have relentlessly argued the group has been an indigenous ethnic community in Myanmar, and therefore does not need to go through a process of association or naturalization.

The deep-rooted 'Indophobia' in Myanmar, while remaining salient, has over time transformed into blunt 'Islamophobia' (Selth 2004, Egreteau 2011: 50-51). It now primarily targets the Rohingya, considered as 'foreign' residents, but also affects the more integrated Burmese Muslim communities, such as the Panthay (Defert 2007, Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2008, Berlie 2008). The Rohingya suffered two dramatic mass exoduses in 1977-78 and 1991-92 when 200 thousand refugees were forced to flee their native Rakhine State westwards, into neighbouring Bangladesh. Whilst thousands flee their homes in Rakhine State every year and try their luck in makeshift boats

throughout the Indian Ocean, forming a new type of 'boat people' (Lewa 2008, Espenilla 2010), the remaining population in Rakhine have faced recurrent persecution ever since (Grundy-Warr and Wong 1997, Mathieson 2009, Human Rights Watch 2012). As observed elsewhere in the world, with the changing of the political context from a colonial enterprise to a nationalistic and independent polity, the communities construed as 'essential outsiders' in the colonial era became unwanted and 'inessential' in the new landscape. Burmese Muslims, particularly those who had made the most of their middlemen skills before independence, were left faced with the choice of leaving the country or assimilating into the Burmese society.

### **Moving North: Seeking Fortune in China**

It was however only with the opening up of the borders between Yunnan and Myanmar in 1988 that Burmese Muslims started to venture northwards. In the late 1980s, the Sino-Burmese borderlands witnessed a relative pacification. Bilateral trade resumed. The Chinese border town of Ruili soon transformed into the bustling heart of an increasingly lucrative trade of both legal and illegal Chinese and Burmese commodities. Whilst thousands of Chinese fortune-seekers began to flock southwards around the Burmese borders, Burmese traders who had till then been based in Myanmar's urban trading centres such as Yangon, Mandalay, and Taunggyi, started to venture northwards, toward Ruili. The town soon became the main entry point into China for all Burmese migrants, including Muslims. There, the latter found a new economic 'niche' to expand their traditional activities. The stories of members of their own communities who successfully established themselves in Ruili since the late 1980s encouraged others to risk the hazardous migration northwards to Yunnan instead of following the still rather popular – but no less hazardous – route into Bangladesh or Malaysia.

It remains difficult to estimate the size of the Burmese Muslim community that has migrated to Yunnan over the past two decades. Their mobility and discretion, and the lack of reliable official data, make any attempt a challenge. Very few of these Burmese Muslims are, in fact, permanent settlers. Most of them possess Burmese identity papers (fake or real), some own Bangladeshi or Malaysian passports and are granted Chinese business visas or temporary residency certificates, which range from one week to one year, depending on their bargaining skills with the local Chinese immigration officers. Based on my research since 2009, I estimate however that by 2012 between 30,000 to 40,000 Burmese are living on the Chinese side of the

border. Among them, most probably 5,000 are Muslims; and four-fifths of these Muslims reside in and around Ruili and Jiegao, the border checkpoint a few miles away. In particular, about 1,000 of these Muslims were Rohingyas, according to members of the local community, by 2012.

There are also a few dozen Burmese Muslim households in Baoshan, 250 kilometres north of Ruili. In the towns of Zhangfeng (Longchuan), Mangshi (Luxi) and Wanding (Wanting), as well as further away along the 'Burma Road' towards Kunming, Burmese Muslim traders are not the strongest competitors to the Chinese, Kachin, and Shan traders. However one exception remains: away from the main commercial axis of Mandalay-Ruili-Kunming, Jinghong in Yunnan's Xishuangbanna Prefecture also shelters several Burmese Muslim and Rohingya families (see Figure 8.1). Over the past decade, Jinghong has become the main jade hub of Xishuangbanna's Prefecture.

Burmese Muslims have set up gem and jade shops there, and sell bracelets or cheap jewellery to Chinese local tourists. In contrast, other Yunnanese cities such as Tengchong or Yinjiang, although very close to the Burmese borders and looking back on a long tradition as trade hubs for Burmese gems and jade, feature no visible presence of any Burmese Muslim households (as of 2012). Burmese Muslims are also largely absent in Cangyuan, Nancan, Mengla, Lancang and other Sino-Burmese border towns in areas dominated by the Wa and Shan. There, the Chinese and other indigenous communities control the trade and circulation of commodities and people.

Some Burmese Muslims run Burmese food and halal restaurants, small guesthouses, grocery stores and cosmetic shops in Yunnan. Others find jobs as domestic workers. According to local informants some are also involved in smuggling goods, including heroin, which is locally known as 'No. 4'. Casual Western travellers are often bluntly offered to buy some. The vast majority of Burmese Muslims, however, focus on the gem and jade business exclusively. Most of them have engaged in relatively small-scale trading, at least in comparison to the local Chinese, Shan or Kachin business communities. The wealthiest Burmese jade dealers settled in Ruili seem very well connected beyond the mere borderlands. They import boulders and stones from Myanmar and sell them to Chinese local dealers; they also look further afield for better transactions in Kunming and Guangzhou primarily. Other Burmese Muslim migrants, petty traders or street hawkers, are more likely to try their luck locally by selling cheap stones or inexpensive jewels on the local markets. Once the sales are done for the day, they travel back to Myanmar. Ruili has become a popular destination for domestic Chinese tourists. An airport was built just 90 minutes away from the town, which

links the area to Kunming, and the world. Ruili is now known throughout China as the 'Myanmar jade gateway', the place to shop for Burmese precious and semi-precious stones. As Chinese visitors tend to stay on Chinese soil during their holidays in Ruili or Xishuangbanna (and do not wish to cross into less developed Myanmar), the Burmese gems and jade has to be readily available on the Chinese side of the border, which further increases the value of the Burmese brokers and merchants there.

Most Burmese Muslim migrants experience China as a relatively liberal place, where setting up a business is still far easier than in Myanmar. Doing business in China (and with the Chinese), as well as developing transnational commercial networks to, and from, Yunnan can quickly pay off. Most Burmese Muslims I interviewed claim that they perceive China's economic environment as far more flexible than its (still) state-run counterpart in Myanmar. Chinese entrepreneurs have appeared quite willing to deal with them as foreign brokers and thus allowed a Burmese commercial niche to grow in the border areas. Yunnan's local authorities have also substantially reduced administrative hurdles during the 1990s. Tariffs are low and in many cases irrelevant, given that informal exchanges across the Yunnan-Myanmar borders are rather the norm (Set Aung 2011). The checkpoint in Jiegao, for example, was established as a Special Economic Zone in 1995, after a bridge was built over the Shweli River in 1992. Since the 1990s and thanks to local arrangements and one-day permits easily provided by Chinese immigration, anyone from Myanmar is free to move in Ruili as long as he or she contributes to the local economy. Even if corruption and patronage is rampant in Yunnan, these phenomena are considered far less of an obstacle to business than in Myanmar. Kyaw Thein, for example, a 25-year old Rohingya who lived in the city of Baoshan since 2009, explains how every year he renews his 'green book' – a residency certificate – for another full year without any problem as long as his business is thriving and he abstains from quarrelling with the locals.

### **Journey to 'Paradise': China as a Safe Haven**

Newman (2006) and van Houtum (2005) argue that borders, beyond offering a gateway to the outside world, are also erected to substantiate alterity – home and away, the inside and the outside, the known and the unknown, the good and the evil. Borders are structured around processes of exclusion and inclusion, as Newman and Paasi (1998) further claimed. Persecuted populations cross borders in the hope of finding shelter, protection and,

in the end, a new life on the other side. China, rather than the Muslim neighbouring state of Bangladesh or the distant Malaysia and Indonesia, has since the late 1980s progressively earned a reputation as a safe religious haven among the various Muslim communities from Myanmar, especially the Rohingyas.

When I asked Burmese Muslims in Yunnan about their motivations for coming to China, most stressed religious discrimination and persecution as the main reasons why they left. Once in Yunnan, they felt a huge sense of relief and soon realized they were allowed to practice their religion far more openly than in Myanmar. In China, they could publically attend religious festivals without fearing repercussions from their neighbours. Even though Burmese Muslims are sometimes perceived negatively by locals (the stereotype on the 'dark and dirty foreigner' often surfaces in everyday situations), they are facing far less day-to-day xenophobic discrimination compared to in Myanmar. Behind the border, they found security and opportunities. Migrating from Buddhist-dominated Myanmar into the Yunnan borderworld was thus also a journey from a deeply antagonistic neighbouring situation to far more open and welcoming one.

The Burmese Muslims in Yunnan are exclusively Sunnis. Remarkably, they are quite well integrated into the socio-cultural networks of the *Hui* (Yegar 1966a, Forbes 1986, Ma 2003). They seem to participate in social activities and engage in religious work with local members of the Hui communities – a key illustration of a neighbouring process at work. However, only local Hui imams are recognized by the Chinese authorities as religious leaders. A Hui imam is thus the only one allowed to supervise Ruili's sole mosque, which was built in 1987. An imam from Rakhine state told me that Burmese imams are nevertheless regularly spotted in town and around this mosque; they are tolerated as long as they do not preach in public, but privately. Despite their different backgrounds, Muslims in Ruili organize religious events together, such as the sharing of *iftar* and the sundown meal that breaks fast during the month of Ramadan.

A case in point is Mohammed Hajj. A Rohingya imam from Buthidaung township in north-western Rakhine State, he first settled in Yangon in 1972 and then moved to Ruili in late 1988, right after the political and pro-democracy upheavals in Myanmar. He has not left Ruili since. In his 70s now, he discreetly teaches Arabic and Urdu, something he could not do freely while in Myanmar. Likewise, the younger Sein Aung has lived in Ruili since 2010. He spent his teens in the former Burmese capital, Yangon. His uncle, also a Rohingya who settled in Yunnan in the early 1990s, brought him to Ruili to work in his small gem shop. 'It's paradise here!' Sein Aung

enthusiastically told me about his new host country. 'I'm very happy here', he stressed, adding that they (the Rohingyas) could practice their religion openly and do whatever business they wanted. He cherished the relative absence of daily discrimination, compared to what he had experienced in Myanmar.

However, the Burmese Muslims are well aware of the limits of the Chinese host society and the political pressure imposed by state authorities: 'we can't use Facebook here in China, [whilst] we could inside Myanmar', Zaw Min, another resourceful Rohingya in his early twenties told me. He used to work for a French NGO in Maungdaw (Rakhine State) before migrating to Ruili in 2011. Facebook has become a critically important tool for young Burmese in recent years, especially since the state censorship has been relaxed in Myanmar after 2011.

Nevertheless, for most of the Burmese Muslim communities the Chinese border acts as a positive barrier that protects them from a brutal Burmese state and a Buddhist-dominated society often prone to religious violence. Crossing the borderline is more than merely a step towards a better economic situation; it is experienced as an act of liberation. Against the background of other communities facing religious persecutions from the Chinese state authorities today, such as in Xinjiang or Tibet, this may seem odd, but the combination of refuge and fortune found in the Myanmar-Yunnan borderworld facilitates a return to their former role as middlemen minority.

### **'Essential Outsiders': Burmese Neighbours as Networkers**

As a diasporic community, the Burmese Muslims possess a long history of transnational networking and dispersal. They have also developed a certain professional shrewdness derived from current experiences and based on old traditions of brokerage and long-distance commerce, especially in an age of colonial enterprises. The Chinese world they found in the Myanmar-Yunnan borderlands since the 1980s has enabled them to make the most, once more, of these assets. Even more significantly, this borderworld also offers them a space where they engage in extensive networking and commercial activities, through multi-faceted partnerships and agreements negotiated with local entrepreneurs. They become, once more, 'essential outsiders' (Chirot and Reid 1997) in this Chinese local business world in which they can successfully develop a commercial niche.

Many Burmese Muslims, like Syed Islam with whom this chapter started, undertook epic journeys via Northeast India, Thailand, Malaysia or even

Saudi Arabia. Abdul Salim, another young Rohingya from Rakhine State, for example, told me how he moved out of his hometown and fled into Bangladesh in 2009. From there, he sneaked into the Indian state of West Bengal and arrived in Calcutta. He continued on to Assam and reached the town of More in India's remote state of Manipur, right at the Burmese border. There, he entered again Myanmar after paying a hefty bribe to local smugglers. He continued by bus to Mandalay thanks to his fake Burmese national identity card, and finally took another bus to the Yunnan border. Both Syed and Abdul had a member of their own community already established in Ruili (an uncle in Syed's case, a village neighbour in Abdul's). This connection helped them getting the necessary Chinese residency papers upon arrival and, subsequently, a job.

Recalling this skilful manoeuvring, Abdul Salim explained to me that after his arrival in Bangladesh he bought fake Bangladeshi papers from some local counterfeiters whom to contact a friend had advised him. With the fake passport, he was able to enter India *legally* and reach Calcutta. There, he took a train to Assam and a bus to Manipur, at the border with Myanmar. He had no problem passing all the security checkpoints that the Indian authorities regularly set up along the roads throughout a north-eastern region plagued with insurgencies and a high level of criminality. To re-enter Myanmar at the border town of Tamu, he needed to switch back to a Burmese identity. To do so, he acquired a basic Burmese identity card by bribing an official and claiming he was merely a 'Bama Muslim' and not a Rohingya.

After he sneaked back into Myanmar by night, he continued by bus to Mandalay where he now had all options to continue his trip to Yangon, Thailand, or Yunnan. At each point of his odyssey, he found fellow Burmese who could assist him and, with the help of local underground networks, including local Bangladeshi and Indian ones, provide the necessary papers for his onward journey.

Such stories of young men venturing out contrast sharply with the image of the downtrodden Muslim refugees sweltering in camps in Bangladesh, or the 'boat people' stranded on Thai or Malaysian shores. Many Burmese Muslims have indeed proved to be extremely mobile and resourceful. The more fearless of them frequently move across borders without official papers. Instead, they rely on well-established clandestine networks, which they can trust. The pioneers who migrated to Yunnan in the late 1980s or early 1990s thereby played a crucial role.

U Aung Myint, for instance, a leading figure today of Ruili's Burmese community and a member of several Chinese jade business associations,



arrived in Ruili in early 1989. Now in his fifties, he recalls how he decided to try his luck after the failure of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising in Myanmar and ventured on the arduous two-day journey from Mandalay (via Lashio) to the Chinese border. He established lucrative gem-and-jade shops and now regularly travels to Kunming and drives a Cadillac. Another businessman Mr. Nasrul Islam, now in his late 50s, runs a cosmetic and grocery shop in the city of Baoshan, some 250 kilometres further north on the road towards Kunming. During the 1988 uprising, he was working in Yangon. Hearing the news that the Chinese border was opening up, he swiftly travelled to Mandalay, and up to Muse to enter Yunnan. The story of Daw Yin Yin, a Sunni Muslim in her late 40s, is another case in point. She was sent from Yangon northwards by her family to set up a gem business in the early 1990s: first in the jade market of Mandalay, and then in Ruili, where business was reputedly growing. She arrived in Yunnan with her husband in 1992. She now owns a small gemstone shop in one of Ruili's indoor markets. Her husband later returned to Mandalay to manage stock and supplies but continues to visit Ruili on a regular basis.

As Ruili's economy continued to surge in the 2000s (Guo 2010), not only the Burmese Muslim community grew, but many already well-settled Burmese Muslim traders also expanded their commercial networks beyond the borderlands, throughout the thriving province of Yunnan, up to Kunming, its capital. In July 2009, U Aung Myint led to Kunming a 70-strong delegation of Ruili-based jade traders to attend an international gem fair. As Vice-President of the Yunnan Gems Traders Association, he is a respected figure increasingly used by the Chinese local authorities to settle disputes between Burmese and Chinese dealers and migrants, and act as a guarantor when the local Chinese police cracks down on illegal Burmese migrants. Although local Burmese middlemen become quite successful brokers, they are no match to the powerful state-run Chinese and Burmese jade conglomerates involved in bigger mining and extraction businesses (Khin Maung Nyunt 1995, Egreteau 2012). While they are not occupying a dominant economic position, they have managed to carve out a niche in Ruili.

## Conclusion

In summary, Muslim communities of all backgrounds seem to have found in the Chinese borderlands a space to trade, live, and prosper in ways they could not dream of in authoritarian Myanmar. As the literature on border studies puts it, they use the borderline as a tool, and exploit the complex

nature of the borderworld and the legal boundaries to form a new space of interconnectivity, especially through cross-border trade and trans-border human interactions (Diener and Hagen 2009). Most have benefited from the local economic boom fostered by China's development policies since the 1980s, and subsequently made the most of the exponential Chinese demand of jade (and more globally of Burmese natural resources and cheap labor). Those who now reside in Yunnan have obtained renewable residency permits from the local Chinese authorities, and many learned the Chinese language. They are allowed to build shops or rent stalls in local markets. They can also travel beyond Yunnan to Guangzhou, Shanghai, or even Hong Kong. Residency in Ruili, thus, opens a window to China, and consequently to the world. Their exilic journey northward can therefore be construed as an attempt not at settling down and assimilating to a new host society in Yunnan, but as an effort to regain some of the 'essential-ness' they previously boasted in Myanmar, but have gradually been deprived of, as 'useful outsiders'. Their professional shrewdness and expertise in navigating and crossing borders, as well as the mediating role of the more established members of their community (such as the imams or well-established and wealthy traders) are the assets that rekindle their usefulness. The paradox is that these assets would be lost, would they fully assimilate into the Chinese society – as many did nonetheless in Myanmar's post-colonial society. The safer and more promising bet is therefore for them to use both the border and their identity as strategic devices in the art of multi-directional, in-between 'neighbouring'.

The Burmese Muslim communities and their post-1980s migration into the Yunnan-Myanmar borderlands therefore offer an interesting illustration of how a borderworld can be construed and used by neighbours in strategic ways. Since the opening-up of the region over two decades ago, the Sino-Burmese boundaries have acted as much as ties that bring together two economies in need of each other, as a protective wall separating two polities. Beyond the Chinese border, the Burmese Muslim migrants have found economic opportunities as well as a safe haven, where they can practice their religion – including in friendly cooperation with the local Chinese Muslim community – trade and travel freely. In comparison to what they can expect inside contemporary Myanmar, they have found in Yunnan their 'little paradise'. There, they enjoy freedom of movement (despite regular Chinese immigration and police controls), less administrative harassment from local authorities (despite the usual bribery), and a more or less lenient attitude of Chinese provincial and state officials toward their Islamic traditions. Many regard the Chinese side of the Chinese border as an at least

temporary sanctuary, where they hope to start a better life, support their relatives back home, and maybe, one day, move on.

The combination of brokering and language skills, trade networks inside Myanmar, and diasporic solidarities has facilitated their success in the Yunnan borderworld and, in fact, much beyond it in mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia or the Persian Gulf. From these border spaces at the edges of China, they engage in neighbouring economic and social activities and make the most of the new connections. Other ethnic or religious minorities from Myanmar (such as the Kachin, the Wa, or the Shan) have certainly developed a different relationship to, and understanding of, the Chinese 'borderworld'. Not all of these other migrant communities seem to extensively use diasporic networks and religious solidarities the way the Burmese Muslims do. But it is precisely the practice of network formation and ethno-religious solidarity that make the Burmese Muslims' neighbouring experiences exceptional. Moreover, the region is constantly evolving along with China's dynamism and rapid development growth. Yunnan in the 2010s has been a far different place than it used to be during the 1990s or 2000s. Since my first fieldtrip to Ruili in 2003, the configuration of the cross-border trade has already much evolved, and the place and role of the Burmese communities of traders, hawkers and shopkeepers (who are not only Muslims) have changed too. As Ruili expands, they face more competition from a wide ranges of different other communities of merchants and brokers. A comparative study in the *longue durée* might also reveal intriguing features, especially if socio-political tensions between the Chinese and Burmese state leadership and society continue to bring about new challenges and opportunities further into the 2010s.

# 9 Neighbouring in Anxiety along the China-Vietnam Border

*Juan Zhang\**

## Introduction

In the early morning of November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007, a dozen Chinese trucks lined up at the Hekou-Lao Cai border gate and blocked the bustling traffic. Around these trucks, a small crowd of Chinese traders and drivers congregated in dismay, complaining loudly about unfairness and injustice. It was the official opening day of the seventh Annual China-Vietnam Border Trade Fair (*Zhong-Yue bianjing jingji maoyi jiaoyihui* 中越边境经济贸易交易会; hereafter the Trade Fair). Under the red banners that proudly announced the success of the Trade Fair, Chinese grievances and disappointment were growing. These trucks, fully loaded with various kinds of merchandise, had attempted to cross the border to reach the Trade Fair's venue in Lao Cai. As they proceeded with customs clearance, to their surprise, they were told by the Lao Cai Customs Office to pay additional tariff by 60 to 140 percent on almost all their commodities, despite the fact that a special duty-free policy was in place for the Trade Fair, which had been the case for the past six years.

At first, Chinese traders, many of whom came from faraway places in Guangdong, Fujian, Shandong, and Sichuan, regarded the unexpected tariffing at the border gate as a mistake of some kind. They reasoned and explained, trying to make the Vietnamese officials understand that the commodities were specifically for the Trade Fair. Pretty soon they realized that their reasoning and pleas were useless. Unable to cross the border without paying, unwilling to go back empty-handed, the Chinese traders were fuming with anger and felt cheated. A few Yunnanese traders were among the loudest; they decided to lead the pack back to the Chinese side of the border and protested in front of the Hekou Entry and Exit Inspection Center. They demanded to see Chinese officials immediately for explanations and solutions.

\* The ethnographic materials used in this chapter are drawn from my 12-month fieldwork in Hekou and Lao Cai in 2007, and a short one-month fieldtrip in 2012. Pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter. I acknowledge with much gratitude the generous support by the University of New England, Australia, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, and Macquarie University, Australia for fieldwork and writing.

This incident reveals the inherently precarious nature of the seemingly benign undertaking of 'neighbouring'. Through this incident, this chapter zooms in onto a particular moment in contemporary neighbouring relations when neighbourly intimacy is defined by cooperation and mutual interest as much as lurking crises and anxieties. To be one's neighbour is to enter into the intimate realm of contact and to be confronted by its vicissitudes. Focusing primarily on the Chinese practice of neighbourly unease, this chapter offers reflections on how apprehensions and anxieties are constitutive forces in the agonistic intimacy of neighbouring. With this Trade Fair incident, this chapter shows that at the moment of acute anxiety, a stronger motivation to strengthen the façade of 'neighbourly harmony' rises. Everyday trade relations, in particular, are sustained by Chinese and Vietnamese partners in practice – not in spite of anxieties but, in fact, are *motivated* by anxieties. Just as Franck Billé's description (Chapter 1, this volume) of the envious gazes between the Russian and Chinese neighbours across the Amur River as both motivating and unsettling, the moving force of neighbourly unease at the China-Vietnam border keeps cordial gestures and productive practices in play. 'Neighbourly harmony' is inherently fragile and volatile. It is a constant practice and is in perpetual need of construction and reinforcement.

Through the drama of the failed yet 'successful' (as the official news proclaimed) Trade Fair, this chapter examines the intricate ways in which Chinese traders manage daily affairs with their Vietnamese neighbours, accompanied by a particular sense of unease of their encounters. This unease is at once a recognition of the unpredictability of dealing with close neighbours. It is also a performative and rhetorical strategy to ensure that surface harmony is maintained, and cooperation on a day-to-day basis is upheld. Through traders' discourses of suspicion and distrust, this chapter explores the constructive force of anxieties that impels compromises, negotiations, ceremonial rituals, staging of friendship, and performances of cooperation.

I locate this neighbourly unease within the dynamic processes of China and Vietnam's reform and opening since the 1980s. At the China-Vietnam border, drastic transformations took place after the brutal 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Border War (hereafter the border war) and the subsequent political stalemate. This borderland was heavily militarized and the border remained shut for a whole decade.<sup>1</sup> Starting from the early 1990s, while the border zone was still mired in restrictions and dangers, a few traders

1 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the Sino-Vietnamese Border War in 1979, its causes and consequences. For details, see for example Li (2007) and Tretiak (1979).

started to explore the untapped trans-border marketplace with bartering and small-scale trade. The consequence of the border war seemed to have little effect on the nascent border trade, as borderlanders soon learned to call their neighbours 'friends' and 'partners', rather than 'enemies'. Veteran soldiers cast off their military uniforms and changed into business suits. Peasants who escaped the war had returned to their bombed down homes to start small businesses. Within a short span of 20 years, the China-Vietnam border turned from one of the most restrictive zones of closure to a prosperous special economic zone of trade and leisure. This once contested border zone has now become a showcase for trans-border development, entrepreneurship, consumption and desire.

In what follows, I will first present briefly the recent history of violence and peace at the borderland and show that the inherent sense of conflict and distrust underpins contemporary efforts of peace and friendship. This is not to suggest that these efforts are dishonest in any way; in fact, because the conflicts and distrust are all too real, people have learned to be more cautious and cordial in order to make friendship work. I relate contemporary neighbourly anxieties to historical relations of power between China and its near neighbour where elaborate ceremonies of goodwill were sometimes spurred by insecurities and embarrassment. It shows that neighbourly gestures are performed most ceremoniously when tensions arise. I then describe the Trade Fair incident in detail and elaborate on the 'intimate insults' (Das 2007), stereotyping and jokes that Chinese traders used to belittle their Vietnamese neighbours. This practice revealed deep seated feelings of distrust, insecurity, and to a certain extent helplessness the Chinese experienced when trading with their neighbours – policies can change without notice, market competitions grow fierce, trading partners turn out to have little loyalty, profit margins become slim. While most of their frustrations have more to do with conflicts between government and business, Chinese at the border find fault with ordinary Vietnamese who may be also suffering from the hardening of the business environment. Unable to hold officials responsible for their arbitrariness, greed, and incompetence, Chinese traders blame their Vietnamese neighbours for being either too smart or too stupid, too flexible or too stubborn. At the same time, the Chinese try to keep the appearance of goodwill and neighbourly amity, knowing all too well that without such performative reassurance, business across the border might not be feasible. This constant state of dilemma and anxiety is the undercurrent to the hustle and bustle of cross-border interactions, the shadow of the amicable surface of everyday life at the margin of the state.

## Good Neighbours, Bad Neighbours, Good Neighbours Again

In their three thousand years of existence in close proximity and of intense interactions, the southern frontier of the Chinese empire and the northern regions of the Vietnamese kingdom went through various kinds of relationships that compounded the neighbouring situation: kin, rival, tribute successions. While evolving together through a long history of peace and war, prosperity and famine, Vietnam has never been able to escape the Chinese influence, and China has never been able to dominate Vietnam. The close proximity and mutual influence that the two nations had on each other produced a state of co-existence characterized by asymmetric power relations (Womack 2006). Since early histories, the neighbouring relations between China and Vietnam have been variegated, encompassing, and subject to continual making and remaking.

When the communist movement brought China and Vietnam together in pursuit of a revolutionary future, neighbouring took on a particular meaning of brotherhood and comradeship. As the 'big brother' in this relationship, China supported Vietnam's struggles against the French and then the Americans through military and material assistance. The Hekou-Lao Cai border, as one of the most important border ports between China and Vietnam, became a major pathway through which Chinese rice, corn, textiles, and weapons were brought to northern Vietnam. Meanwhile, China suffered the worst famine in modern history. Although millions died from starvation, Chinese aid to Vietnam did not stop. This deathly sacrifice that many Chinese made, willingly or grudgingly, was for the grander purpose of supporting an ideal of communist unity in the region. A rhetoric of 'helping a neighbour/brother' was used by the Chinese state to justify its actions while people learned to 'tighten their belts' to help a neighbour in need.

In the Hekou-Lao Cai border, however, local Chinese benefited from being physically close to their neighbours as they had better access to food and supplies. Starvation was minimal as local Chinese and Vietnamese shared the aid they received and much of the limited resources that they had. Those who had endured this period of hardship in Hekou still remembered this time fondly – although people had very little, they were generous; as neighbours Chinese and Vietnamese helped each other out: 'you gave me half bowl of rice, and I gave you a bunch of wild vegetables, that's how we survived together'.

It was the simple faith that neighbours ought to help each other out that sustained borderlanders through difficulties. When China declared war on Vietnam in the late 1970s it came as a shock to the locals. The building

up of animosity between these two countries was, in fact, gradual, lasting from the late 1960s to the 1970s. Before both states became openly hostile to one another, the rhetoric and performances of friendship and brotherhood continued to dominate. However, it was also during this period that strong suspicions and dissatisfactions started to grow. The leadership in China believed that they had lived up to the role of a 'brotherly neighbour' who never faltered when the Vietnamese were in deep crisis, and they expected respect and obedience in return. The Vietnamese suspected the Chinese attempt of domination and refused to become a puppet by seeking support from the Soviet Union instead. The Chinese leadership felt its 'natural authority' over Vietnam was defied and that blood and money had been spent for very little in return (Chen 1995). The Vietnamese gradually saw China as a new enemy because of its contempt and arrogance (Li 2007: 252). In the early 1970s, skirmishes along the China-Vietnam borders became more and more frequent. And on February 17<sup>th</sup>, 1979, the border war broke out. From then on, bloodshed and armed conflicts dominated the frontier zones. For the following ten years, the border was heavily militarized. Most borderlanders fled to inland regions in search of safety. Those who stayed continued to work as farmers, local guides, and civilian soldiers (*minbing* 民兵) to help their troops with food, surveillance and local defence.

Borderlanders on both the Chinese and Vietnamese sides who stayed through the decade-long conflict found it difficult to accept that their close neighbours could turn into enemies as many farmers were recruited to become armed civilian soldiers. The trust was ruined for those who could no longer tell whether their familiar neighbours were still innocent farmers or in fact merciless soldiers. One veteran in Hekou told me that when the war broke out he felt betrayed and hurt by the Vietnamese. He still had relatives and friends on the Vietnamese side who helped his family during the famine; but when conflicts intensified he became cautious of what he could say or do, for he was no longer sure if his acquaintances had already become Vietnamese spies. Now, in retrospect, he lamented that he must have been brainwashed into believing that his neighbours were 'devils' (*guizi* 鬼子) in disguise. A few local businessmen in Hekou who experienced the terror of war told me that the worst was when they saw the dead bodies of people they knew, who were killed by landmines, or by Vietnamese neighbours who regarded these people as soldiers. 'The Vietnamese are too close to us', one local trader told me, 'we have no place to hide if the Vietnamese were to launch an attack'.

Vietnamese borderlanders were equally weary of the border war. In fact, many of the Lao Cai residents still could not understand why the Chinese



declared war in the first place. One family that lived in Lao Cai for the past 30 years related to me their experience. The father used to be a farmer and continued to work on his fields during the Chinese invasion. Prior to the war he traded his produce regularly with the Chinese and this helped feeding his family. When the war broke out his family had to hide in the mountains for a few days. Upon returning they found that their house had been burned down, and some of their friends killed during the invasion. The close proximity bred fatality when a good neighbour turned into an enemy.

The political and military tensions between China and Vietnam lessened considerably since 1986. This was also when other coastal regions and provincial capitals in China began to benefit from the nationwide economic reforms. With caution and nervousness, local residents in Hekou and Lao Cai also started bartering and trading with one another at the river banks and hidden mountain tracks. Soon, both governments officially facilitated small-scale border trade at designated marketplaces even though diplomatic ties between China and Vietnam had not yet been resumed. Emphasizing on mutual help and local needs, trade was encouraged so that everyday commodities such as clothes, medicine, salt and sugar, and household utensils could be purchased. Since the 1990s, border trade soared after Hekou became an official 'open border port' (*bianjing kaifang kou'an* 边境开放口岸) designated by the Chinese State Council, and started to enjoy favourable policies as a special economic zone. Since 2007, Hekou has been the biggest and most profitable border port in Yunnan province (Hekou Ministry of Commerce 2008). Local borderlanders took advantage of the 'opening' of the border and ventured into various kinds of businesses. Trade markets thrived as businessmen, investors, and tourists started to arrive and explore new possibilities. As 'doing business' (*zuo shengyi* 做生意) dominated everyday cross-border interactions, Chinese and Vietnamese became once again friendly neighbours.

### Performative Intimacy

Today, both the Chinese and the Vietnamese governments maintain that the prosperity of the border special zone relies heavily on friendship, cooperation and peace. These are cast as the foundation of mutual progress and good neighbouring. Starting from 2002, Chinese leadership officially promoted its 'Good Neighbour Diplomacy' (*mulin waijiao* 睦邻外交) that promoted peace and stability, communication, and cooperation, and hoped that this could ease regional anxiety over China's 'rise' in economic and military

power. In Southeast Asia, China has been particularly friendly towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as it aims to promote 'good neighbourly and friendly relations, increase high-level exchanges, and strengthen the mechanism of dialogue and cooperation in all areas to enhance understanding and mutual benefit' (Chambers 2005: 16). However, suspicions and anxieties in Southeast Asian countries do not easily go away when China seems to repeatedly violate the thin trust that is built upon non-binding bilateral agreements and business contracts. While Chinese leaders continue to join regional and international forums to promote dialogue and friendship, China's increasingly assertive behaviour in flexing military muscles, particularly when it comes to territorial disputes, remains alarming for China's neighbours. The South China Sea disputes in recent years, for example, demonstrates best the fragile nature of neighbourliness. As China signs action plans for strategic partnership with Vietnam, it also builds drilling platforms and other construction on the disputed Spratleys. While Vietnam strenuously protested against Chinese drilling and threatened an arbitration case at an international tribunal, it also has to emphasize the amicable relationship between two countries. While tensions over territorial disputes continue to cast shadows on China-Vietnam relations, friendship and good neighbourliness are also diligently performed.

Historically, for the Chinese, neighbouring entails a particular strategy of *huairou* (怀柔). James Hevia, when writing on imperial rituals and diplomacy of the Qing Empire, calls it 'cherishing men from afar' (Hevia 1995). Other scholars have pointed out that 'cherishing' may be too innocent a word as *huairou* indicates a distinct imperial attitude of pacifying barbaric nations through civilization and royal benevolence, so that these nations are willingly subservient to China's power and influence (Esherick 1998, Zhang 1998). The acts of *huairou* are performed most ceremoniously through imperial rites and rituals when nations near and far sent their embassies to pay tribute to the emperor. In return, they received gifts and concessions for commerce.

In the long history of Sino-Vietnamese relations, Annam (northern Vietnam) had always been viewed as a loyal and submissive tributary state of the Chinese Empire, although China could rarely get its way in conflicts or in peace. John E. Wills recorded a telling incident in the Qing history (Wills 2001). In 1725-1728, the Qing imperial court had to send troops to the Yunnan-Annam frontier to deal with a substantial Annamese encroachment of bordering territories due to claims to a promising silver mine. When the king of Annam refused to give up his claim to this zone and amassed soldiers at the border, Emperor Yongzheng decided that the

territory was not worth fighting for. The rivers and thick jungles made the frontiers nearly ungovernable, hill tribes were connected on both sides of the border, local lords were stubborn and powerful, and trade was taking place on unregulated markets and clandestine tracks. Giving the territory to Annam would be a grand gesture of *huairou*, as the Qing court hoped that Annam would be grateful to the generosity and benevolence of the emperor and remain loyal and submissive to the Qing rule. In the end, a great ceremony was held when the Annamese officials received the royal edict conceding the territory. The matter was settled and neighbourly peace resumed.

Bradley Davis (2014) documented another episode of borderland anxiety and cooperative power brokering from 1874 to 1879 when the Sino-Vietnamese frontier was under the rule of Vietnam's Nguyen dynasty but in effect dominated by the Black Flags (*heiqi jun* 黑旗军) led by a Chinese military rebel Liu Yongfu. When the Black Flags, an armed rebel band from southern China, entered northern Vietnam as they fled purging from the Qing army, they quickly established an alliance with the Nguyen court by killing Francis Garnier, a French explorer who advocated colonial expansion and attempted to overthrow Nguyen rule in the Red River Delta. Liu Yongfu, already a powerful local lord in the lucrative trading town of Lao Cai, set up customs posts in the frontier and demanded a much higher duty on trans-border trade and charged additional fees on transport, inspection, protection, and permission to sell. The French consulate and the Nguyen officials in Hanoi had to respect Liu's lordship and sent envoys to negotiate terms of commerce along the Red River. While maintaining respect and civility during the negotiations, the French and Vietnamese secretly called Liu 'an ignorant, unyielding, and mistrustful bandit who has lived by raping the mountains for these past twenty years' and the Black Flags 'the enemy of upland populations' (Davis 2014: 67). Still, the Nguyen authorities had to rely on Liu's army to keep peace and generate revenue through tax. In 1878, Liu was even awarded a special bonus by the Nguyen court, a payment made to mark special events and meritorious service to the state. Liu and his personal militia also began to receive regular salaries and supplies directly from the Vietnamese court on a monthly basis. The endorsement of Black Flags as officials enabled the Vietnamese court to maintain authority in areas beyond its administrative reach; at the same time, Liu and his armies were never to be trusted as they remained a vicious threat. Cooperative power brokering had to be entertained for the sake of frontier rule and profitability, even when anxiety and mutual distrust remained central to such an uneasy relationship.

These incidents in the Sino-Vietnamese history point to the critical intimacy in a neighbouring relation when conflicts and distrust co-exist with performances of goodwill and fidelity. This inherent tension is unlikely to go away, as it continues to trigger caution and inspire greater efforts in making relationship work. The Sino-Vietnamese border conflict was another major incident in the history of these two neighbours when intimate ties broke down and had to be rebuilt again. But trust was not easy to find. Brantley Womack wrote about the lingering effect of distrust in his reflection of the asymmetric relations between China and Vietnam:

After the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1991, [...] the disparity remained and grew more complicated. Now both countries were concerned about developing a peaceful relationship, but “off the record” and in concrete areas of confrontation, the Chinese disparaged the Vietnamese as unreliable, while the Vietnamese were alert to Chinese malevolent inscrutability and bullying. The attitudes were not simply the residual effects of previous hostility. The issues were the peacetime problems of border trade, bridges, rail connections, and so forth, not problems of history. But there was a continuity of roles. Vietnam tended to be overly sensitive to China’s actions, while China tended to be insensitive to the effects of its policies on Vietnam. (Womack 2006: xi)

If at the official level, such distrust is experienced subtly and expressed vaguely, at the local level, borderlanders who live in close contact have a more complicated view of neighbouring anxiety. On the one hand, past shadows of war and sabotage continue to haunt borderlanders, and the constant movement of traders, workers, tourists and other visitors at the trans-border marketplace makes any long-lasting relationship difficult to maintain. On the other hand, trade and collaboration must go on as usual despite the underlying anxieties. The intimate relations borderlanders forge are always fraught with subterranean caution and uneasiness.

### **The Trade Fair and Its Unease**

The Annual China-Vietnam Border Trade Fair was the brainchild of the Yunnan provincial government and China’s Ministry of Commerce. It is the first official trading function organized by local governments of Hekou and Lao Cai to consolidate China-Vietnam cross-border ties. The first Trade Fair was held in Lao Cai in December 2001, which was considered a huge

success by both local governments in terms of economic benefit and symbolic significance. Since then, the Trade Fair has grown considerably in scale and influence. High value commodities are traded at this event every year, and lucrative contracts sealing million-dollar deals are signed. For years, the Trade Fair has been a signature showcase of the economic (and diplomatic) success that an open economy can bring to the borderland. But the 2007 Trade Fair, as the vignette at the beginning adumbrates, ended on quite a different note.

On November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007, when the Chinese traders and truck drivers were protesting in front of the Hekou Entry and Exit Inspection Center right next to the border gate, I joined my friends and went to see what was going on. The local police had already arrived and tried to separate the protestors from the spectators attracted by the commotion. Chinese traders were making their demands in unity and asking Hekou's local authorities to act quickly and negotiate with the Vietnamese. If this matter could not be settled quickly, they claimed, the Hekou government as the main organizer of the Trade Fair should compensate the traders for their losses. Most of the traders protesting were not of familiar faces, and my local trader friends were simply watching the commotion without joining in. Later that day I met up with Weifen, a seasonal pineapple trader and tour guide who has been doing business in Hekou for over a decade. I asked him what was going on at the Trade Fair and he vented out his frustration:

This is why we always say that the Vietnamese are not trustworthy, not honest (*bu kexin, bu laoshi* 不可信不老实). You see what is happening now? We are right about them. We have this Trade Fair every year, but this kind of nonsense never happened before! Last year the Trade Fair was held in Hekou. These Vietnamese came over with their expensive redwood furniture, and earned several million dollars at the Fair. We did not tax them a single cent for their furniture, because the main purpose of this Trade Fair is to provide opportunities and a platform for traders. Who would have thought that the Vietnamese are playing dirty tricks this year?

After Weifen complained enough about the Vietnamese, he changed target:

Of course, Chinese traders are upset! It is understandable. But they are making a huge deal out of this now! They all gathered at the border making a scene! Now the police have to go there. It is total chaos. How can these traders get what they want if they behave like this? In a situation like this, we Chinese should stick together. Why rile things up in our

own home turf? We are fighting amongst ourselves and the Vietnamese are getting away with their secret schemes (*yinmou decheng* 阴谋得逞). We are making a big scene here and they are laughing their teeth off watching us!

Embedded in Weifen's indignation is a chronic frustration that local traders have with their Vietnamese neighbours. Even though many Chinese traders in Hekou have come to terms with the Vietnamese style of doing business (which, according to them, is characterized by short-sighted greediness and crude dishonesty), they were still surprised by this incident and claimed that they did not expect such a glaring breach of agreement to happen in a high-profile event like the annual Trade Fair.

This incident and the surprise experienced by Chinese traders shed light on the fragile foundation of neighbourly interaction. When the seemingly harmonious border turns into a contested social space, the 'radical Otherness' (Žižek 2005) of the neighbour becomes visible and confronting. It reminds those involved in the neighbouring situation that familiar cross-border encounters can be unpredictable. This incident shows that the rhetoric of 'friendship' and 'harmony' is not capable of preventing confrontations and disruptions, and that the established order can be challenged without notice. Amidst the most amicable efforts to be good neighbours, suspicion lures, waiting to be confirmed (Žižek 1997).

For Hekou's traders, this Trade Fair incident was but another indication that one should never take the smooth sailing of border interaction for granted. If the official bilateral agreement on duty-free trade can be violated arbitrarily without warning, one could hardly be confident that individual deals and arrangements made in the marketplace would be honoured. Although feeling self-righteous, Hekou's traders had come to the realization that Hekou's local government had very little weight in bargaining with the Vietnamese government and in defending Chinese interest. One the one hand, Chinese traders were upset that the Vietnamese were not punished; on the other, they were concerned that if such punishment did happen it might jeopardize future opportunities. Many indeed were aware that their fellow Vietnamese traders were also victims of the arbitrary levy imposed by Vietnamese officials, but by blind anger and frustration they lashed out on all Vietnamese alike. Those who were new to cross-border trade could not do much except lament and indulge in wishful thinking that stern actions must be taken against the Vietnamese the next time around. Playing the hurt victim, they derived a particular sense of justice from excessive complaining. Others who had established deeper roots and enjoyed close

partnership with their Vietnamese counterpart also complained openly about Vietnamese dishonesty in the Chinese gathering, but they wasted no time in making quiet arrangements so that their goods could still make way to Vietnam via other, often illicit, routes.

### Coping with Neighbouring and Bordering

What came as a surprise to traders in Hekou were not merely the conflicts that took place at the Trade Fair, but the confrontation of the unexpected in the familiar. They had to come to recognize their own vulnerability and limitations as they failed to rein in, or even to predict, this neighbourly 'otherness'. Slavoj Žižek in his Lacanian analysis of the 'neighbour' wrote about the peculiar ways in which one encounters a 'neighbour' – the fully subjectivized Other par excellence. The 'neighbour' is someone like 'me', 'my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirror-like relationship of competition, mutual recognition and so forth' (Žižek 2005: 143). Under normal circumstances, neighbourly interactions are predicated upon social norms, established rules of engagement, and expected cultural etiquettes that underpin such interactions. However, once in a while, the unexpected happens and familiar norms of engagement are defied. This unexpected disruption reveals the precariousness and the fragility of neighbourly relations, as friendliness and courtesy can be ripped apart without warning as subterranean hostility comes to the surface. This is the moment when one is exposed to the 'neighbour as the impossible Thing that cannot be gentrified' (Žižek 2005: 143).

In an all too familiar way, the Chinese at the border re-enact a particular trope of 'minority contact' when they engage with the Vietnamese. Just as China's minority subjects are often constructed as modernity's Other (see e.g. Gladney 2004, Nyíri 2006, Schein 1997, 2000), some of the Chinese borderlanders and traders still harbor an impression that the Vietnamese are a 'minority' who should follow the Chinese lead in pursuit of frontier modernity. Many traders who visited Lao Cai likened this border town to a Chinese city 'in the 1980s', and compared the Vietnamese state of living to what the Chinese had already experienced in the past. They readily recognized the 'semblant', a familiar 'mirror image' of themselves personified by the Vietnamese, and relied on the Vietnamese reciprocal recognition to validate Chinese superiority.

When an unexpected incident took place, the Chinese illusion and the fragile nature of this imagined recognition was exposed. It came as

a telling moment when the Chinese were met with the potential threat of misrecognition they did not expect. When Weifen complained about the lack of unity of Chinese traders in crisis, he was imagining that the Chinese had become a laughing stock. This humiliating 'laughter' from the neighbour threatens to nullify the Chinese superior sense of self. The anxiety of being 'laughed at' is a constant source of potent paranoia at the border. A few traders related to me that they usually felt worst when their Vietnamese partners bragged about their own business savvy and laughed at Chinese gullibility. While the Vietnamese might be just joking about how naïve Chinese traders could be tricked into buying unmarketable commodities or overpriced products, Hekou's traders took these jokes as insults. Although they were not amused, fake laughter and compliment on Vietnamese business skills had to be made, because they also wanted to sign contracts and secure friendship. 'To survive one has to learn to make compromises', a furniture trader in Hekou told me, 'and you have to act as if you are on their side, and you agree with them even when you are offended by their stupid jokes'. 'Some Chinese are indeed gullible', he reasoned, 'perhaps they are too eager to make a deal; but most of the time Chinese traders are just too trusting, or maybe they do not mind losing a little money to the Vietnamese as a deal sweetener'. His words, however, could not hide the frustration that he had to 'sweeten' business deals more than he was willing to, and his 'generosity' could still be misinterpreted as a sign of lacking business acumen.

On the second day of the Trade Fair, Boss Jiang, a trader dealing in toys, hosted a banquet for his local business partners and guests from Zhejiang province. Conversations at this banquet at first circled around the troubled Trade Fair. Soon, everyone at the table was complaining about doing business with the Vietnamese. Boss Jiang talked about how he disliked the Vietnamese practice of doing business on credit (*shexiao* 赊销) instead of taking a loan from the bank, which would be the standard practice for most Chinese businessmen. Boss Jiang's Vietnamese partners were used to ordering large quantities of toys but never paid in full. If they could successfully sell the products in Vietnam, the balance was then repaid. If the sales were poor, the Vietnamese either further delayed the repayment, or requested not to pay until the sales picked up. Boss Jiang had several experiences that some of his new Vietnamese clients just ran away and disappeared without paying him at all. The money lost in these deals were 'tuition fees' (*jiao xuefei* 交学费), Jiang said; but he'd rather lose money for the benefit of learning the 'true nature' (*zhen mianmu* 真面目) of some Vietnamese traders and valuing those who were trustworthy. The Trade



Fair debacle was surprising, but he was not surprised what the 'greedy Vietnamese' would do to make a quick buck.

Boss Jiang's local friends also admitted that the Vietnamese could still indulge in 'backward' ways of doing business, such as relying on credit, because they were spoiled by Chinese traders like themselves. As the market competition intensified, Chinese were even willing to take a loss to secure a deal and hopefully a long-term partnership. It was frustrating for these Chinese traders, because while they had very little confidence in Vietnamese credibility, they had to carry out business with them on an unreliable system of trust, verbal agreement, and personal credit. They still agreed that networks and mutual trust were important for trans-border businesses; they also complained that such a 'trust' was often not very trustworthy.

It is this tricky 'neighbourly' reality that demands a particular market (ir)rationality where Chinese businessmen seem to be willing to accept unreasonable conditions just to make sure that they are not cut out of the game and their partners across the border remain friendly. Some of the businessmen I know did not mind cutting down prices to a minimum, or even offering the Vietnamese the possibility to 'borrow' commodities first and pay later. Boss Ding, a vegetable trader originally from Guangdong in southern China, had to tolerate the practice where his Vietnamese clients could choose and pick from a truckload of fresh produce delivered to their doorsteps. The Vietnamese had the advantage to pay for only the best and freshest produce and rejected the damaged ones as a result of the long transit. Several other vegetable and fruit traders like him were doing the same thing. They were afraid that if they demanded their clients to pay for the full truckload, the Vietnamese would simply go away and use another supplier instead. Over the years, Boss Ding spent a great amount of money and energy into making sure that his long-term Vietnamese clients were happy and comfortable, so that he would keep his business going. He trusted his clients, and called them his 'old friends'; but he also admitted that such a trust was high-maintenance work.

Another trader of fashion clothes, Boss Qin, who also came from Guangdong, usually gave free sample clothing to his Vietnamese partners to 'test the market'. Prior to the Trade Fair, he was communicating with his partners about marketing a new design of jeans. He sent two thousand pairs free of charge to his partners and waited to hear the result of the sales. If the sales were good, the Vietnamese would pay him back. If the sales were poor, the Vietnamese would simply return the unsold jeans back to him. He had been doing this for quite a few years. His Chinese trader friends called

him 'cheap' (*jian* 贱), but he said that he had little choice. At first this was an effective gimmick to attract new Vietnamese trading partners; pretty soon Boss Qin realized that he could not stop doing this even if he wanted to. The Vietnamese were so used to his 'friendly deals' that they would not have it any other way. Boss Qin was naturally not happy with this situation; however, he became used to it and received his reward for this trusting gesture. His partnership with the Vietnamese retailer was strong, and they maintained a very amicable relationship that was helpful for business. The Trade Fair saga did not frazzle him, as he had never relied on trading events such as this to make his business work. His partners had reassured him that once the drama quieted down, they would pull strings and make sure that his jeans go through customs without paying additional taxes. Now he just needed to wait. Boss Qin told me that in crisis like this, good friends on the other side were truly helpful. While he always held reservations about his Vietnamese partners, when the unexpected happened he had no better way but to trust their promises.

The Vietnamese had their reservations too. One of Boss Qin's partners, Mr Anh, a fashion retailer in Lao Cai, expressed his distrust against many Chinese traders he encountered. Having lived through the border war, during which time his father and uncles were enlisted as civilian soldiers, he saw the cruelty of Chinese soldiers burning down his house and other family properties. He loathed the Chinese for the invasion and for killing his fellow countrymen. When the border re-opened, he also saw opportunities to get rich when the Chinese brought in commodities that the Vietnamese needed. When cross-border trade just started, he remembered, the Vietnamese were sincere but the Chinese were scheming – they brought in low-quality rubbish such as used plastic ware, old clothes, and second-hand white goods that no one wanted in China and sold these to the Vietnamese. Some Chinese traders were bullying the Vietnamese into accepting these low quality goods for a high price. 'Even now the Chinese were not much better than before', he told me in one of our gatherings, 'their food was poisonous, their toys had lead, their soaps and lotions were full of harmful chemicals'. 'If the Vietnamese were picky', he reasoned, 'it was because we had to be – we don't want to sell low quality products to our customers'. He had been doing business with Boss Qin for over five years, and so far his trust over their partnership had not been compromised. He knew that Boss Qin would like to receive payment from him sooner; but he had to make sure that each batch of jeans he received was of good quality and was marketable. Until he had made sure by making a good profit, he would be reluctant to repay Boss

Qin. Although they have been good friends for many years, Mr Anh said, 'One can never be too careful'.

Cross-border trade at the Sino-Vietnamese frontier is full of ordinary suspicions, mild arguments, subtle conflicts, and carefully maintained trust. These are embedded in the 'agonistic intimacies' (Singh 2011) of neighbourly interactions. The façade of amicable relations and friendships is kept until the moment when the unexpected happens. When the normalcy of interactions is disrupted abruptly, the familiar social relations and practiced norms break down and prove to be inadequate and fragile.

The 2007 Trade Fair was one such moment when the Chinese traders were confronted by the very artificiality of border norms, and find themselves still unsettled by unexpected confrontations. At first, nothing seemed to be a good enough solution to redress the situation. Two days into the Trade Fair saga, the Hekou Ministry of Commerce proposed a plan to appease the disgruntled Chinese traders. For those who travelled from other provinces to the border, each would receive a compensation of RMB 4,000 (approximately US\$500) to cover transportation and incidental costs. A special trade zone was designated in Hekou's new trading district as a substitute for the Trade Fair, where Chinese traders could do business amongst themselves. Chinese traders were still unhappy about this solution, claiming that they had travelled long and far to engage with the Vietnamese market, rather than trading with fellow Chinese. For many, the insult was acutely felt when they were rejected entry at the border gate. Regarding themselves as honoured guests and model entrepreneurs, they felt mistreated and disrespected.

At Hekou's makeshift substitute trade zone, a sales representative of a famous regional winery in Yunnan expressed openly his indignation that what the Vietnamese did was a slap in the face. 'This incident was of an international scale', he declared to a small group of traders around him, 'and both the Chinese and Vietnamese central governments should take this matter seriously. The Vietnamese county government in Lao Cai was short-sighted, looking only for a quick income; and the Chinese county government in Hekou was weak and lacking strong muscles'. He suggested a strong retaliation the next time around. One man sitting at the next stall selling home entertainment systems stated that Hekou government should do something and show that China could not be easily bullied. 'For example', he suggested, 'in 2008 when the subsequent Trade Fair takes place, China should deny entry to all Vietnamese companies. It would teach the Vietnamese who's the boss'.

A week later, the 2007 Trade Fair ended quietly and most of the traders left town without further drama. The repercussions of this 'international

incident' were minimal. Although the 2007 Trade Fair did not receive comprehensive coverage in the local and provincial media (unlike in previous years), there were a few general reports on its success. The unpleasant conflicts disappeared completely in these reports. A month later, local traders in Hekou no longer took this incident seriously, as their deals still went through via various formal and informal channels. Peace and friendship resumed in business relations as if the incident never took place. 'It was difficult for our Vietnamese partners too', Weifen told me later on, 'and they also suffered loss like us. It was important to move on and not let this one incident damage our business'. Other businessmen were easy to forgive as well. They comforted themselves in thinking that a loss this time might bring profit in the long run. By 2008, when the subsequent annual Trade Fair took place in Hekou, no retaliation was made as the Fair was most ceremoniously held. Over three hundred Chinese companies and 60 Vietnamese companies joined the Fair, generating over US\$1 billion in revenue by trade and contracts (Hekou Ministry of Commerce 2008). Mitigating conflicts and letting go disputes is an essential skill in border living. This is a fundamental technique practiced for the benefit of intense everyday interactions and exchange. Since neighbours do not easily go away, unpleasant incidents are best forgotten.

### The Business of Future

On the opening day of the 2007 Trade Fair, while the Chinese traders were protesting in anger at the border, a grand opening ceremony took place on a meticulously decorated stage in the main event venue in Lao Cai. Huge red banners were hanging on each side of the stage with words of goodwill. On the left, the banner read 'friendly neighbours, all-round cooperation, long-term stability, future-oriented attitude' (*Mulin youhao, quanmian hezuo, changqi wending mianxiang weilai* 睦邻友好, 全面合作, 长期稳定, 面向未来). On the right, the banner read 'good neighbours, good comrades, good friends, good partners' (*Hao mulin, hao tongzhi, hao pengyou, hao huoban* 好睦邻, 好同志, 好朋友, 好伙伴). At the venue of the Trade Fair, however, rows after rows of empty booths were telling a different story. This emptiness rendered the 'good neighbours, good friends' rhetoric artificial and hollow. This void, like a grim reminder of the unexpected moments of neighbourly unease, pointed to the foundational precarity at the heart of the neighbouring interactions.

**Figure 9.1** The 2007 Border Trade fair, Lao Cai



Juan Zhang, 2007

**Figure 9.2** Empty Booths at the Trade Fair, Lao Cai



Juan Zhang, 2007

It would be wrong, however, to understand this precarity as an intrinsic threat to the legitimacy and integrity of neighbouring at the border. Becoming and being neighbours cannot escape this precarity. The point of neighbourly unease is the motivation it brings in managing relations between those who live in close contact. As Chinese at the border talk anxiously about Vietnamese dishonesty, they eagerly aim to demonstrate how different they are from their 'inferior' neighbour by taking (albeit sometimes involuntarily and reluctantly) the 'high ground'. The politics of differentiation are enacted when the Chinese aim to embody moral qualities of big-heartedness and generosity. Despite the performances, neighbouring unease does not go away quite easily. The point of unease is that neighbours are always reminded that friendship and surface harmony can be easily broken; and to make neighbouring work, compromises and strategies of pacification are necessary. Not unlike a localized practice of *huairou*, Chinese traders negotiate with the Vietnamese tactically and with care. Concessions and settlements are part of the neighbouring technique used to lubricate interactions and reduce friction; and grand ceremonies are always performed to mask tension.

In a sense, neighbourly unease is unexpectedly productive. The narrated distrust reveals that neighbouring relations need constant reinforcement. More efforts need to be invested in the celebration of harmony, mutual interest and a shared future of prosperity. Intimacies in trade relations are not devoid of doubts and suspicions. And traders on both sides (or at least on the Chinese side) are acutely aware that such doubts should be contained, tensions soothed, and mishaps forgiven. Neighbouring entails the ability to make compromises, to vet out frustrations, to forgive, and to move on.

The makeshift trading zone that was set up as a substitute of the 2007 Trade Fair was a newly developed business district in Hekou. It was designed to become a new face of the Hekou special economic zone. This zone, featured prominently by China's Central Television in a program on 'Looking for gold in Hekou' (*Dao Hekou qu taojin* 到河口去淘金), carries the promise of a prosperous future. When the Hekou government decided to use this new zone as the ideal location for the substitute Trade Fair, the intention was not only to solve the crisis at hand, but also to invite Chinese traders from interior regions to imagine the promising future of border trade in Hekou. Chinese traders were informed that the Red River Bridge, the third cross-border bridge between Hekou and Lao Cai, would be completed by 2009. By then, trucks would be able to take advantage of hassle-free border-crossing and swift inspections. A national new highway was constructed which could cut down travel time from Hekou to Kunming

by half. Business in the zone would be completely duty-free being a special zone within a special zone.

By early 2011, these promises all became reality. The new bridge is now directing most of the cargo traffic, and allowed trucks and passengers to clear customs 'within seconds' (Wang and Liu 2012). The new highway has cut down travel time considerably, although many truck drivers still prefer to go by old routes to save on toll fees. New border markets, condominiums, and shopping centres are changing the entire landscape of the new zone. Since 2007, annual Trade Fairs have been organized as planned, with each new one larger in scale and more profitable than the previous one. When I revisited Hekou in 2012, traders informed me that being friendly with Vietnam had indeed been a worthwhile effort. The 2007 Trade Fair debacle was just a minor setback in the process of all-round economic integration (*jingji yitihua* 经济一体化), not only between China and Vietnam but also China and the ASEAN market. The stage has been set. Those who know how to work with neighbours and share a vision of the future can best take advantage of what an opening border promises to offer, even though it may mean that they have to always live anxiously with their neighbours.

## 10 China's Animal Neighbours

*Magnus Fiskesjö\**

### Introduction: Animal Neighbours and Chinese Circumstances

There are two distinct but interrelated aspects of the presence of animals in the world of people. Firstly, they figure at least potentially as neighbours in their own right – neighbours who can exchange glance with us and communicate with us, and who are notably able to be the agents of their own considered actions. These characteristics of mutual awareness, distance, and recognition are hallmarks of a neighbourly relation, which in this sense differs from that of friendship (for which it has potential, but which it does not include). Animal rights activists and children's books authors often hasten to describe animals as 'our friends', but I believe the concept of neighbour relations is much more productive. Just as with any independent-minded human neighbour whom we must respect for what he or she is, animal neighbours may also choose to *not* enter into anything beyond the most basic aspect of the neighbour relation itself – which I take to mean the mutual recognition of each other's right to an independent existence, one alongside the other, including the right to be left alone by the other. I hope to argue that this original good neighbourliness between humans and animals does still survive in China, and also that it is being revived in some ways, despite all the evidence to the contrary in a land ravaged by centuries of human efforts to remake the landscape for human purposes only.

Secondarily, and in contrast to such neighbourliness, animals also are appropriated by humans as the tools and props of human sustenance. This notably includes in their use in the significant symbolic games that humans engage in amongst themselves, within human social relations. The reason for our preference for deploying animals as symbolic reference points is precisely because they are sentient beings that resemble us more closely than other living things (because, as we know today, we humans share most of our original evolutionary blueprint with other animals, our next of kin). Thus, for us, they are even more 'good to think' (Tambiah 1969) within our own relations, than are plants or other living things.

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I argue that the relation with animals as potential neighbours in their own right is the primary one – animals originally were present alongside us humans, since they evolved (like plants, fungi, and so on) alongside with us in nature, not for our sake but in parallel with us. This original relation of the animals as sentient beings existing in parallel with us still survives today in some forms, and this is worth considering today, especially, as the planet is turned into a heavily anthropogenic and human-dominated landscape – a development more thoroughly prominent in China, than in most other parts of the planet. In this new landscape, in China as in Western Europe and similarly radically human-dominated areas of the world, animal diversity as well as the numbers of animals has become drastically reduced (Elvin 2004 is probably the best overall account of this radical transformation; also see Menzies 1992, 1994).

### **Human-Animal Relations in China Today**

In China, as in other heavily anthropogenically transformed regions of the globe, human-animal relations survive mostly in a few rather limited and restricted ways: In the relations with pets, which are heavily dominated by and dependent on their human masters, but which can also engender mutual human-animal emotional attachments; with other domesticated animals that we force to work for us or appropriate for consumption (and which are encountered less and less alive and more often only as corpses, of industrially-farmed meat animals); and also with the last remaining wild animals, which, however, we mostly meet only in carefully staged encounters in zoos, and the like; or in other kinds of heavily managed environments, or, indeed, as pests to be combated and cleared away.

In this new and even unprecedented situation of increasing human isolation from animals as neighbours in their own right, intimate and friendly relations with living animals survive almost only in the highly controlled relation to pets, which are kept at their owner's mercy. As Atran and Medin (2008) have argued eloquently, the general decline and loss of our formerly more rich experience of encounters with a diversity of other beings sharing our space is drastic, and it is important to consider for how it inevitably will impact our own cognitive makeup as humans.

It is clear that while the original relation of animals as our non-human neighbours still survives to a limited extent, today it has been vastly overshadowed by the instrumental relations in which we force animals into subservience and make use of them on our terms, whether as pets,

as a source of labor, as the source of food, or in symbolic use, in our own communications amongst ourselves, or as pests that are to be driven away (as with wild animals like mice and insects seeking to co-habit with us in our homes). In this situation, where humans are increasingly isolated from peer-like animals, the question of what neighbourliness could still mean between people and animals comes to the fore – perhaps nowhere more so than in China, the former expansive empire which has become the world's most populous nation, mostly bereft of animals except in the (resurging) keeping of pets, and in the other more hostile modes. The humans-only world of China is also being spread beyond its borders: China's national economy is already practically the world's largest in human monetary terms; as such, it is also increasingly integrated with world capitalism as a new centre of the Global North, and increasingly extracting natural resources beyond its own borders.

At the same time, the global debates over animals and people are spreading to China, often as part of a rising environmentalism – advocates of animal rights, previously found mostly in industrialized Europe and in the Americas, now are also found in China – though many such Chinese activists are still mostly concerned with domestic animals such as dogs and other pets which they seek to save from being harvested for food, and much less often with wild animals that do not have any direct use value for humans, or are seen as pests. Current Chinese environmentalism is oftentimes inspired from the West but harks back to indigenous traditions such as the Chinese Classics or to Chinese Buddhism for evidence that could help justify and bolster the standing of a contemporary indigenous Chinese environmentalism – by trying to present environmentalism as a native and ancient tradition.<sup>1</sup> For example (as admirably discussed by Cao 2010), Western animal liberation activism is compared to Chinese Buddhist ways of setting free captive animals for the purpose of making merit for oneself.

The rise in citizen's animal protection activism is also related to the increasing wariness of industrial cheap foods (junk food) in China and the resulting dramatic rise in the desire for natural and healthy foods (as in eco-food marketing; in the growing trend of rural restaurants framed as Nongjiale, farmhouse food; and so on, cf. Park 2014). It must also be noted that government authorities in China are also – partly because of

1 For examples from the Chinese literature, on environmentalism see Pu (2014), Song (2012), Wang and Zhang (1999), Zhao (2006); on animal rights and animal liberation, see Cao (2010); for outsider's perspectives, see Callicott and Ames (1989), Cao (2011), Estok and Kim (2013), Kalton (2010), Lal (2003) and many others.

pressure from international intergovernmental organizations, and so on – adopting an eco-friendly stance, acknowledging environmental pollution problems and even engaging in public advertisement campaigns (on subway billboards, etc.) promoting an awareness of endangered global wildlife such as rhinos, elephants, and so on, which are being harvested for illicit but burgeoning Chinese markets.

At the same time, the related new trend within Western philosophy to attempt to re-think human-animal relations, on the other hand, has barely spread to China so far. In the West, it includes figures such as Burgat (1997), and a host of thinkers building on Heidegger's ideas about animals, notably two of Heidegger's foremost pupils: Jacques Derrida (Berger and Segarra 2011, Calarco 2008, Derrida 2008), and Giorgio Agamben, whose work *The Open: Man and Anima* (2004) is concerned with the consequences for us humans of our own categorically anthro-centrist and much too self-centred distinction from 'the animal', a humanism that Agamben sees as the product of a Western 'anthropological machine' – and that refuses the possibility of animals as (good) neighbours. In anthropology, this trend includes incisive critics of anthropocentric framings of animals such as Tim Ingold (1988), likewise inspired by Martin Heidegger.

### **The Deep Roots of China's State-Engineered Anthropocentrism**

Drawing on Agamben and other thinkers, Møllgaard (2010) argued, in ways rather different from the apologetic searching for native environmentalisms, that a very similar project of anthro-centrism in human-centred terms lies at the heart of the version of Confucian philosophy that has long guided Chinese statecraft. What Agamben critiques as a Western 'anthropological machine' finds its parallel in the ideological premises of Chinese state-making, in the service of a ruling elite which self-presents as simultaneously the arbiter of the distinction between humans and animals, and the indispensable guarantor of the human-animal divide and of the superiority and privilege of humans in this divide (see Lewis 1990: 212, Møllgaard 2010: 130-133 and others).

Many students of Chinese philosophy (e.g. Zhao 2006 and others) have argued that the ancient Chinese view was different, in that it placed humanity within the larger scheme of nature and emphasized the harmony of that totality, as opposed to European anthropocentrism. And, it is true that in Europe what were once similar conceptions of totalized harmony later gave way (in medieval and Renaissance times), to new Christian-inspired

conceptions of a nature configured in opposition to humanity, which must master nature, and lord over it (Elvin 2004, 2010), and one can say that Chinese thought did not come to appropriate such ideas until modern times, then in the shape of the Soviet-derived Communist-modern teleology of human history as the history of growing human manipulation and domination of nature.

But it is equally true that the traditionally dominant Chinese conceptions of human-natural harmony did not at all hamper but rather promoted the ruling elites' self-definition as the privileged arbiter of humanity and nature, indeed as the conqueror of nature. Thus in Zhou times, the era that provided the molds for later Classical thought, we simultaneously find (and without contradiction) a cosmology of 'harmony' orchestrated by the privileged elite, as expressed in rules on the seasonal restrictions on hunting, and so on (the kind of evidence that current-day Chinese environmentalists like to point to); but also an explicit revelry in the elite-led conquest and killing of menacing wild animals, and so on, equally justified in the same cosmological terms, by the position of the elite as the necessary arbiter of society, against the wild. This ideology was a key lever for the buildup of the most ancient Chinese kingship (Fiskesjö 2001). One could even read the early 1950s state-organized mass hunt of tigers and other 'vermin', which was organized by the new Communist rulers and largely exterminated the tiger in China (cf. Coggins 2004, Environmental Investigation Agency 2013), as a repeat instantiation of this sort of ancient propaganda spectacle.

Although we can identify differences in philosophical traditions East and West, we must also couple any discussion of such tenets with the actual-historical progression of human expansion and appropriation of nature that they have been deployed to justify. In the West, as in modern China, animal-rights activists and environmentalists have faced the ideological obstacles of economistic arguments favouring human-led 'development' of natural resources, but as they attempt to re-argue human-animal relations, both also face the obstacle of anthropocentric traditions of thought and practice, which in China mainly means a Confucian anthropocentrism veiled as 'harmony with nature'. The Taoist critiques that have focused on of how such false harmony cover up unequal appropriation and destruction (Møllgaard 2010) may well represent, alongside Buddhism, a major fountain of native intellectual tradition that can be used to reconstruct neighbourliness and challenge the mainstream (instead of trying to locate a Chinese environmentalism in ancient Confucianism, which may be a futile endeavour).

'China' can be defined as a surreptitiously revived project of state-building and expansion, where each resuscitation has involved drawing on certain recycled conceptions, as if they were eternal (Fiskesjö 1999). In this mainstream tradition, the definition of humanity's place in the centre of a (harmonious) world typically relegated animals (as well as human beings perceived as more animal-like), to a status as lesser beings, relegated to a lower rank in an imagined developmental scheme that organizes the more and the less developed (Fiskesjö 2011). Even today, such schemes, in their modern version as the Chinese mantra of modernity as development, still dominate and help organize the expanding Chinese economic exploits in its borderlands as well as around the world, in the name of this development. Little heed is given to the animal neighbours, as economic expansion extends into areas previously not touched by such exploits, and alternately replaces or displaces previous exploitation by other economic powers, or it breaks new ground, on a new scale.

### The 'Three Thousand Year War'

The current developments, in which remaining wild forests are turned into mono-species cash crop plantations and mountains into mining ventures on a scale never seen before, further highlights the stark contrast between a human-dominated and anthropogenic landscape and what is left of landscapes with less anthropogenic influence – otherwise known as nature. From the perspective of the already heavily anthropogenic setting of densely-populated central China, the margins of the country as well as the new frontiers beyond the border (such as in neighbouring nations like Burma, in Africa, South America, and so on), represent refuges of forests and other remaining natural resources that have already been denuded or exhausted in China's core areas. Today, while these frontiers are increasingly exploited by Chinese entrepreneurs, who are increasingly reaching farther for an intensifying economic exploitation of natural resources (on Chinese investments in Burma, see for example, Kramer and Woods 2012), there is also an accompanying renewed 'exploitation' of the receding frontier forests and its denizens as the raw material of fantasies fundamental to the Chinese self-identification as civilized, including in its modern transformations (on which more below).

Mark Elvin (2004) chronicles the process leading to today's overwhelming human domination as the 'three thousand year war', and his use of the term 'war' may be justified, on several levels: Firstly, as already mentioned and as

we know from ancient Chinese texts, early paradigmatic kings and culture heroes were described as warriors able to kill wild animals obstructing their rule and the peace of the farmers ruled over by these same rulers. Secondly, beyond such lore, the process itself involved a much longer and important war on forest-dwelling animals perceived as threats (the elephants and the tigers the most symbolically important among them), in which deforestation was intentionally deployed as a major strategic weapon depriving such animals of their habitat. This worked in tandem with the expansion of Chinese-style agriculture, which served as a tax base. One result was the denuded anthropogenic landscape of central China, increasingly dependent on fertilizer intervention, and also prone to increased flooding as deforestation proceeded further afield. A side effect was that, as historical records show, timber became a scarce resource in the old heartland of civilization (Elvin 2004: 43-44), a development that itself prompted further expansion and state-sponsored measures specifically to obtain timber as building materials. This was accentuated in late imperial times (Ming, Qing), when even the far southern reaches of the empire were deforested in this way. Today it is reaching vast tracts of Burma overlooked by British colonial exploitation.

### **Animality, Animals, and China's Human Others**

Historically, this process has involved confrontations with non-human and human Others that strangely parallel each other, where animal and human 'neighbours' has been conceptualized and organized along similar lines, with the 'barbarian' non-Chinese human neighbours conceived as more like animals, on a sliding scale. The most striking evidence for this, in addition to the rich lore of how such barbarians live like animals in the forest or like animals in caves (where they notably fail to cultivate and cook their food like the Chinese do), is the peculiar and uniquely Chinese way in which these human neighbours were given written names that classified them as semi-animals (Fiskesjö 2011). This seemingly strange parallel of course also has to do with early Chinese configurations of statecraft and its long-lasting, cherished tenets of how the rulers' position is both actually and symbolically justified. It is indicated by the rulers' capacity to either kill or subdue the animals of the wild, and their duty to civilize those that may be civilized, while destroying and clearing those that cannot – or who oppose their inclusion in 'civilization' – a discourse that notably includes morally framed distinctions between docile and willing domesticates, and

harmful wild animals. As noted by a number of scholars (Fiskesjö 2011, Pines 2004, Sterckx 2002), this ideology, especially in its enduring imperial formulation, included the conception of humans and animals as a graded range of beings that mirrors the 'chain of being' of Christian Europe. But this ideology comes with the important Chinese characteristics of the self-identification by the ruling elites as themselves necessary to uphold and maintain a proper cosmic order, including its gradual extension throughout humanity and among other living things as well. There are of course deep tensions involved in the conflicting claims of the pretence to a guardianship of a cosmic harmony, the claim to be justified in pioneering the clearing of the forest, and the mission of civilization. Mark Elvin (2004) is right to point out the curious lack of sacrifices to forest spirits and the maintenance of sacred groves in the earliest Chinese states. Perhaps state-making cancelled most such shrines and gave precedence to the agriculturists' culture-heroes daring to destroy the forests and kill its denizens – so that the ideology of harmony was reduced to a mere pretence, as the early Taoists argued (and, sacred groves persisted only among yet-to-be assimilated peoples on the periphery of the State's reach (cf. Coggins 2004).

In my view, under modern China's veneer of ethnic equality, where the former barbarians' names has been edited into humanized ethnonyms without the animal classification, the system still preserves elements of a 'chain of being'-like conception of the 'ethnic minorities' as people that are less than fully human (Fiskesjö 2011). The ethnic minorities are still conceived as 'closer to nature' in the same manner in which, as barbarians, they were formerly conceived as ranking closer to the animals of the wild. The preservation of such elements of a chain-of-beings conception may above all serve the bureaucratic state elite which continues to cast itself as the natural guardian and orchestrator of cosmic 'harmony' – albeit today in modern terms, as when the notion of a historically existing Chinese harmony with a natural order is advanced (for a recent example, see Zhao 2006).

A number of scholars of the history of human-animal relations in China (notably Sterckx, Lewis, Elvin, and others, as well as Chinese scholars of environmental history and animal lore) have explicated the uses of animals and their destruction in the making of moral parables to extend this overall vision. Incidents of encounters with animal neighbours, both domesticates and wild animals, have been used to exemplify the tenets of moral philosophy and social order, and the appearances of such unusual animals have been interpreted as portents with implications for human affairs, wherein the animals are uninteresting in themselves, and only matter as

a messenger of reflector of cosmic shifts of interest to reigning emperors. Sterckx (2002) notes how in early China, the animal naming apparatus itself is primarily a device of interpretation and classification for the purposes of human government, and it almost never involves the study of animals in their own right, even in lexica and encyclopaedia compiled specifically to identify animals. Roughly speaking, the detailed observation and study of animals appears only with the introduction of Western science and its use in enumerating, identifying and then more effectively appropriating animals, plants, and other non-human entities and resources. (It seems that this Western influence did not change much of the former certainty, in the dominant ideology, about the question of the animal – their distinctions from humans; their place in the world).

We must note the overlap of methods used to harness and manage both wild animals and wild animal-like people, and how these are themselves embedded in human economic expansion. Consider the use of salt in history, simultaneously a desirable item, and a key commodity. We know how, along with iron as a formidable weaponry technology, salt-production was seized upon by the early imperial state and re-made as a closely controlled monopoly. This was not only to prevent profiteering individual traders from acquiring too strong a position in relation to state agencies, but also had a strategic purpose in managing human relations by harnessing the demand for salt into a tool for rendering human adversaries more docile and accepting of Chinese terms of trade, and control. And, as suggested by Shinji Maejima (1931) in his extensive study of salt and the Southwestern barbarians, the management of salt production and salt markets and trade to attract non-Chinese human neighbours into manageable Chinese liaisons already long ago, was explicitly aligned with the use of salt licks as a bait for luring non-human wild animals such as deer and wild bovines (buffalo, gaur, etc.) out of the forest, so that they could be either killed or captured (Maejima 1931, Vogel 2003). That is to say, the controlling and harnessing of trade in salt and other items to manage ethnic others not as neighbours but as dependents, to the advantage of the Chinese state, may even originally have been modelled on the way in which the hunter lures his prey out of the forest. In this parallel, which fits eminently with a chain-of-beings conception of living things, the civilized deploy their superior intelligence and understanding to obtain obedience from those possessing a more rudimentary intelligence, so as to overpower them and draw them into the sphere of economic utility. This parallel extends beyond the use of salt monopolies to other products, and such analogies abound in the context of the still-powerful historical Chinese imaginations of the



receding wilderness frontier, at which these different neighbours figure on a scale reaching from the civilized human through primitive animal-like intermediaries to animal, and from culture to nature. Obviously, there is very little of true (or, if we prefer, 'good'), neighbourliness in these examples: instead, mostly, we seem to find only the calculated use of others for one's own instrumental purposes.

Even today, the traditional Chinese fantasies of the ethnic other as almost-animal are not only not at all out of date, but instead seem to be gaining new ground – as in the exotics promoted in mass Chinese commercial ethno-tourism, and in the new eco-wildlife tourism, which develops as the wilderness recedes ever further. The animal-like 'primitive' peoples may well in actuality be deeply integrated into the Chinese economy, especially as they too have been encouraged to join the mass ranks of migrant workers that keep up China's industrial output. But select samples of them are nevertheless at the same time encouraged to self-present as 'wild primitives' in tourist ploys that satisfy the desires of domestic tourism and help keep alive the fiction of a chain-of-being persisting even inside China's border (Fiskesjö 2014); all this is of course but a Chinese version of a more general phenomenon, previously instantiated when Western colonial-industrial powers fantasized about primitive peoples as 'closer to nature'. Tourism agencies catering to the increasingly affluent upper classes of Chinese society may even go on to appropriate other Asians and Africans for these same purposes, on a global scale – there are rumours that a Chinese-styled Disney model of ethno-theme parks designed along these lines is being exported by Chinese entrepreneurs to places around the world where wealthy Chinese tourists may now go.

### Imaginary Animals

In tandem with this usefulness of ostensibly wild people, wild animals still constitute an analogous and highly significant presence in the Chinese imagination – even though, or perhaps one should say because of how they have already been eliminated from huge swaths of the intensively populated and cultivated central China. The establishment of nature reserves for the protection of wildlife habitat and for use as tourism destinations also fills a similar function in the economy of Chinese self-imagination – sometimes as artificial safari zoos, a key new institution that is being opened in multiple locations across urbanized China (even as some traditional zoos are ravaged by killings of zoo rhinos and other precious animals to

supply the abomination that is the current, surging luxury trade in body parts and stuffed specimens. cf. Guilford 2013, Lü 2013). But as with the human zoos of ethno-theme parks, this also does not represent encounters of neighbourliness, but rather the projection (onto new sites of convenience) of a Chinese-styled ideologically framed border between the human and the wild, arranged to be 'experienced', recognized and reinforced, again and again.

The continuing, persistent role of certain animals in the related economy of 'medicine' that is efficacious because drawn from famous wild beasts, is a flip side of this. We see it in the currently unfolding tragedy of the intensifying race to slaughter the world's last rhinos (in remote Indonesia, Assam, and Africa; Vietnam's last population was recently exterminated by poachers). Poachers kill the last rhinos only to obtain their horns, to smuggle and sell them to service the market inside China and in several other Asian countries where wealthy people are still deeply captivated by fantasies of aphrodisiac properties of such horns, which in reality is simply nail-like material entirely lacking such properties.<sup>2</sup>

The list of such fantasy phenomena goes on: they include the body parts from tigers and pangolins and other exotic species used for similar purposes, as well as elephant ivory used for carving seals, and bodily adornments. It also similarly includes many exotic culinary items, like bird-spit nests (swallow's nests), bear paws, shark fins and the like (Blumenfield 2011, Kaiman 2012). These 'dishes' are perceived to hold beneficial properties precisely in as much as they derive from known hard-to-access exotic and wild species and places, mobilized in a 'spectacle of nature' that is performed at restaurants and other urban sites, so as to tickle the imagination and sense of power on the part of wealthy urbanites (cf. Igoe 2010).

### **The New Chinese Animal Activism: Reasons for Hope**

In this context, it is highly interesting to note the new public outrage unfolding in China recently (and reflected in television news in Hong Kong and around Asia, and on global news outlets) over the extraction of gall or bile from captive live bears, which are estimated at up to tens of thousands of animals across China (Hobson 2007, McDonald 2012). The outrage also seizes on the harvesting of paws as a delicacy, sometimes cutting paws from the same animals that are kept alive while tapped for bile. This campaigning

2 Larson (2010) conveniently lists multiple studies confirming this fact; see too Ellis (2005).

has reached flash points where the profiteering businesses themselves have been confronted in attempts to publicly shame them and harm their ability to profit (Bristow 2012).

I see this focus on bears' suffering as especially interesting, because bears are meant to be wild, living apart from humans. The sympathetic relationship with bears cultivated by the activists thus more clearly resembles the neighbourliness of which I spoke at the beginning of this essay – more clearly so than the protests against the suffering of human pets or pet-like domestic animals that have otherwise dominated the activities of China's nascent animal rights movement, such as the fascinating rescue operations to save dogs or cats about to be captured as restaurant food (Al Jazeera 2011). These developments too may involve a sense of neighbourliness with the dogs and cats, but only in a highly qualified way, since (unlike the bears), cats and dogs are animals firmly tied to and dependent on human society. If pork and beef are acceptable there is obviously no inherent reason not to slaughter dogs and cats for food, but in several recent Chinese cases, anti-dog meat campaigning has led to the shutting down of dog-meat culinary festivals (Wong 2011).

The Chinese campaigning against both the uses of the bears and against the use of dogs as food can of course also be interpreted as a moral alignment with the taboo on eating dogs and cats embraced by many Westerners, or even, more generally, as a product of social relations in urbanized capitalist consumer society, East and West. More empirical research is needed on this, but it seems to me it is highly plausible that a large part of it is prompted by the dynamics of a symbolically significant competitive global race in civilization that comes to pass due to the prevailing contemporary global power relations. When Westerners condemn Chinese or other peoples' eating of dogs and other such animals (and the hypocrisy involved in this is beside the point here), many contemporary Chinese accept what they see as Western international norms as desirable values and then come to sense that China is falling short, and they engage in the mimicking of Western discourses and activist practices. This may even be at play in initiatives for official legislation prohibiting the cruelty against animals (Whitfort 2012). Yet many Chinese will inevitably feel at the same time that a wholesale condemnation of everything Chinese could not be condoned as a consequence of their lacking respect for animals or the environment and nature at large, and hence the substantial Chinese literature returning to the Classics and to Buddhist wisdom in an attempt to find an original Chinese contemporary-styled environmentalism and sympathy for animals.

And yet I wish to argue that apart from this game of mirrors, there is also at the same time in the West and in China, and beyond, an emerging

honest concern for animals as fellow living things, or, put otherwise, as neighbours. It is true that in China today, as in the West, many animal-rights activists tend to focus on those animals that are closest to people. They tend to project the demands for rights to humane treatment for humans, to pet animals in their proximity, thus leaving themselves open to accusations, fairly or not, that they really are more concerned with own self-interest and self-appreciation, than with the animals they pretend to care for. The same issues exist when, by extension, these movements come to overlap and coincide with organic-food and fair-trade movements in attempting to uncover and put a stop to the ill-treatment of domestic animals whose hide is used in our shoes, whose fur is made into clothing, or the like. But in taking up the cause of the caged wild bears and mobilizing concerned celebrities to help publicize it, as when the former basketball superstar Yao Ming visited a 'Moon Bear Rescue Centre' (*Heixiong jiuhu zhongxin* 黑熊救护中心) in Sichuan, on February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 (Animals Asia Foundation 2012, McDonald 2012), it does appear that the movement is now not only advancing beyond the defence of pets and other domesticates but also revealing a fundamental concern for animals as neighbours (and the bear activists are certainly not alone; see for example Watts and Chen 2009). In 2014, Yao Ming asked the Chinese government to ban all trade in ivory, and he has joined hands in campaigning on the issue with both Chinese and foreign celebrities – including Britain's Prince William who visited China and its last remnant of Asian elephants, in March 2015. Just ahead of the royal visit, China's government announced a one-year ban (BBC 2015) that is widely suspected as a publicity stunt that won't dent the rapidly advancing global extermination of the rhinoceros and the elephant which is currently unfolding, today driven largely by Chinese domestic luxury consumption (Gao and Clark 2014). One can only hope the campaign to shame both users and illicit 'producers' in China and in Africa might stop the massacre.

Yet of course these Chinese movements are limited in scope and numbers, to some extent inspired offshoots of Hong Kong-based animal right's activism (especially since the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997), and they may be much too late to save either the world's last rhinoceroses, elephants, or tigers from total extinction. But they may signal a significant shift. The significance of the concern for ordinary wild black bears from the forest and for their general well-being in their own remaining habitat, stands out further when compared to the officially sanctioned but rarely passionate concern with the rarefied panda bear – which hails from some of the same forests but has been protected mainly as a politicized symbol of the Chinese State (Nicholls 2010, Songster 2004).

The issue of whether or not animals could suffer was in fact a key triggering point for the debates about anthropocentrism in European philosophy and public opinion, and came to extend to political questions of what kind of human society we would like to have. Perhaps the question of whether the Chinese black bears suffer when they are forced to leak their internal fluids, in what can very readily be compared to gruesome forms of *human* torture, may serve a similar role in triggering self-doubt about the anthropocentric justifications for the unhindered enslavement and selfish extermination of animal neighbours in China. It would still matter, both for ourselves, and for those animal neighbours that remain, after the thousand-year wars that we have waged on them – in the case of the rhinoceros, the elephants, and the tigers, on-going, Chinese-led final *blitzkrieg*.

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