ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF HIGHLAND ASIA

Edited by Jelle J.P. Wouters and Michael T. Heneise

Chapter 1

HIGHLAND ASIA AS A WORLD REGION

Jelle J.P. Wouters and Michael T. Heneise

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1

HIGHLAND ASIA AS A WORLD REGION

An introduction

Jelle J.P. Wouters and Michael T. Heneise[1]

Introduction

Imagine, for a moment, that there are no borders, geopolitical tensions, political conflicts, or stringent visa regimes; a world where trails and paths fork out uninterrupted by states haunted by manifest anxieties over territory, sovereignty, and the reverberations of political cartography. In such a world, it would be possible for you, provided you possess extraordinary stamina, determination, and abundant time, to trek from Kyrgyzstan to Vietnam without ever having to set foot in a single lowland. This handbook refers to this massive, contiguously hilly and mountainous expanse as Highland Asia.

Along the way, you would meet peoples that have variously cultivated affective bonds with their ecological niches. The same would have adapted through diverse forms of securing livelihoods, ranging from pastoralists in the Pamirs, Sherpa mountaineers in Nepal, seminomadic yak herders in Tibet and Bhutan, Trans-Himalayan traders, wet-rice and swidden cultivators in the Indo-Burma borderland, (until recently) hunters and gatherers in Northern Thailand, and horticulturalists in Vietnam and Southwest China. You would be travelling a charismatic landscape with energies and spiritual affordances of many kinds, where places have their own experienced being and are animated with gods, deities, spirits, and other nonhuman persons that are deemed sentient and therefore conscious and agential (Smyer Yü 2015; Sprenger, this handbook). This, indeed, is a landscape and cosmos where culture/nature and human/nonhuman dualities and dichotomies readily dissolve, time and temporality take on distinctive formulas, and intersubjective, intertwining, and mutually embodying relations between landscapes, humans, and other-than-human beings are constitutive of a complexly layered social sphere.

As you continue to traverse hilly slopes, lush grasslands, and frosty mountain passes, you would also notice the existence, confluence, and hybridisation of several world and local religions, including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Bon, Christianity, and Animisms and Shamanisms of many bends. You will also hear the sounds of different languages spoken around you every other day. Some of these languages borrow, lend, and ultimately share aspects of grammar, rhythm, vocabulary, and even poetics. Here and there, this creates 'linguistic areas', where languages from different language families gradually become more similar through subtle linguistic changes over time. But more overtly powerful than this type of linguistic convergence

is the multilingualism among speakers of mutually unintelligible languages and the social networks that underpin them.[2] A few other languages, such as Burushaski spoken by the Burusho, in Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan, are language isolates, making it, in effect, a language family of its own (Kreutzmann 2017). Still, linguistic isolates are often in intense contact with other languages and over time, linguistic relation is created through social processes rather than 'genetic' descent.

Most people you would interact with, provided you find a common language to converse in, would strongly espouse their ethnic identities; speak with a layered mix of aspiration and apprehension about the capital-intensive infrastructure and state-led development projects that recently entered their ancestral lands. They would also stress their inalienable right to cultural difference (not infrequently inserting the word 'indigenous', in English, in their conversations[3]). They are further likely to lament how recent changes in climate and the environment are affecting water-bodies, animals, crops, and livelihoods and probably utter grievances about being marginalised, misrepresented, often misunderstood by those living in the lowlands and the state, whose institutions and policies identify them by exonyms rather than by locally preferred autonyms (on the politics of ethnic classification and the history of naming, see Michaud, this handbook).[4]

These lowlanders, including most of those who staff the state, usually belong to nationally dominant communities and may alternately essentialise highland communities and their lands in terms of authentic/exotic cultures, as sensitive geopolitical spaces, as remote peripheries to be developed, as realms of cultural deviance that need assimilation, as new resource and capitalist frontiers, and as dangerous smuggling routes and sanctuaries for rebels. However, such stereotypes, highlanders themselves insist, are hardly an adequate representation of the fullness, richness, and complex nature of their highland living.

In your attempt to complete your journey, you would have to navigate and make your tracks without the assistance of a single, complete map (as well as stay clear of forest spirits, were-tigers, fierce dragons, Nāga (half-human, half-serpent), the abominable yeti, and other mythohistorical figures that locally stand in for dangerous animals and places (Heneise 2016)). This is because Highland Asia neither exists on any modern map nor is it recognised as a world region. Yet, as this introduction sets to convince, there are compelling reasons to think of this highland region as deeply connected and distinct, as both an ecumene and a heuristic.

Highland agency, intentionality, and imagination

As a space, Highland Asia is distinctly diverse; it contains different religious traditions, livelihoods, environments, forms of government, historical experiences, a daunting multitude of languages, and so on. Yet, it is also deeply entangled with its ecologies and inhabitants continually implicating each other in myriad ways of adaptation and ethnogenesis, ritual and pilgrimage, trade and tribute, political resistance and struggle. It is further a longstanding contact zone between cultures and civilisations, as well as a space that was at all times connected by abiotic and biotic matter, including humans and the things, ideas, and ideologies associated with them.

Geographically, the rugged topography of Highland Asia encompasses three adjoining massifs, namely the larger Pamirs (also referred to as the Central Asian Mountains or as the Hindu-Kush-Karakoram-Pamir landscape and its mountainous offshoots, including Tian Shan and farther north the Altai Mountains), the Himalayan Massif, including the vast Tibetan Plateau, and the Southeast Asian Massif including the hills and highlands of Southwestern China. These mountains, plateaus, and hills are estimated (conservatively so) to be home to well over 250 million inhabitants (including cultural lowlanders having migrated to the highlands[5]) that have

adapted to 'highland living' in an astonishing variety of ways. As a conceptual zone, Highland Asia cuts across the traditional divides inherited from colonial and Cold War era divisions – the Indian subcontinent/South Asia, Southeast Asia, China/East Asia, and Central Asia. This renders contemporary Highland Asia a transregional landscape par excellence. For millennia, moreover, Highland Asians have connected far-flung regions through movements of peoples, goods, and ideas, and they are thence as much movers and actors of global history as the European colonists, Indian intellectuals, Japanese imperialists, Mongol nomadic invaders, Buddhist monks, or Han and Arab merchants who occupy centre stage in discussions of global history.

This point of highland agency, imagination, and intentionality is salient to our introduction, which holds that contemporary life in Highland Asia is best interpreted through the dialectic between vernacular agency and the forces of the world beyond. As a case in point, modernity, here, understood as an ever-unfolding positioning towards being and dwelling in the current world, in the highlands, is not simply derivative of dominant lowland versions, be they Indic, Sino, Arabic, or Euro-American in orientation. Granted, of course, that world-historical processes, of capitalism, democracy, secularism, developmentalism, extractivism, consumerism, authoritarianism, popular culture, militarism, and so on, impact and alter highland outlooks, and often drastically at that. Granted, too, that modernity, broadly conceived, often presents itself as a pathos and paradox in the highlands. This is because the reclamation, revival, or rootedness in cultural traditions exists conterminous with a seemingly all-pervading, inescapable, and intrusive modernity, in comparison to which cultural pasts may be felt as a place of backwardness, as out of tune with the contemporary world, as unable to stand alone, and in need of validation by modern standards (see Smyer Yü 2015: 98–127). Yet, when studied up close, the forces of modernity, for all their transformative potency, are usually as much deflected, interrupted, negotiated, truncated, and indigenised as they are uncritically adopted in the highlands.

In the Pamirs, to illustrate, modernity came variously disguised as the 'white man's burden', as Cold War spheres of influence, as communist reform packages, as capitalist development, and as rural uplift and infrastructure development. But even as these external interventions undoubtedly spurred change and transformation in the Pamirs (as across Highland Asia), each was first put through the grinder of local cultures and histories, became adopted and embedded in regional practices, and was made autochthonous in the process (Kreutzmann, this handbook). To illustrate further, consider the resurgence of custom in highland Northeast India, where the realm of 'the customary' – of authority, land ownership, and justice – is constitutionally protected and through whose chiefs, councils, and codes the modern institutions and procedures of state, democracy, and elections are filtered and ultimately function (Wouters 2015a; 2018b). Here, the authoritative arrival of modern institutions did not wither away 'the customary' but revitalised it, along the lines of *The Modernity of Tradition* (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967), with customs acting as the brokers and mediators of the present and the future. Or, for that matter, consider the highlands of Burma/Myanmar and Laos, where external injections of venture capital – in tourism, casinos, nightclubs, hotels, and other forms of entertainment – became capitalised on by local ethnic communities, particularly by its elite sections, to modernise centuries-old political stratagems to keep lowland states away (Marshall 2002; Rippa 2020; Nyiri 2012). Consider, moreover, the intensive marketing – through the merchandise of ethnic wear, cultural megafestivals, and traditional cuisine – of highland identities in the Eastern Himalaya (but not just there) (Longkumer 2015; Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2017), and their self-advertising through the modern fibres and channels of mass and social media (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), at once signifying newness of traditions and future-oriented ethnic revival.

In all of these cases and places, the authoritative arrival of forces of modernity did not result in the 'flattening' of cultural differences. Per contra, across Highland Asia, modern world-

historical processes meet, mix, and mingle with pre-existent values, ideologies, and life projects, become syncretized, and in the process also offer highland communities new avenues to express and adapt their identities. Said otherwise, Highland Asians are hardly the mere passive recipients of modernity but equally its repositories and enactors. For this reason, highland modernity is not best captured in the frames of 'multiple' or 'alternative' modernities, as was for some time the prevailing mood in modernisation theory, but as 'vernaculars', just as Sino, Euro, or any modernity are vernaculars, with historical trajectories, cultural mediations, moral and material teloi, and a striking self-consciousness that is characteristic only of themselves. As a process, modernity in Highland Asia is thence always being made, unmade, and remade, and in ways at once embedded in world-historical processes and as creative innovations and appropriations that unfold in the long history of the present.

Besides shapers of global history and makers of modernity, Highland Asian communities have always also been political worldmakers and thinkers in their own right, not just the rebels, refugees, actors of resistance, or timeless 'primitives' influential socio-evolutionist traditions of scholarship have often reduced them to. Their political craftsmanship reveals itself as much in projects of state and empire-building, such as is central to Tibetan political history (McKay 2003; Shakabpa 2009) and the rise of upland monarchical rule in Nepal (Whelpton 2016), Sikkim (Mullard 2011), and Bhutan (Phuntsho 2013), as in polities brilliantly designed to resist predatory regimes of power and capital, with their loci in adjacent valleys and lowlands (Scott 2009; Fiskesjö 2010a; Guite 2019).

As a case in point, premodern state projects repeatedly faltered at the hills, whether in Afghanistan, Northeast India, or the hills of Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. Significantly, this was because forms of highland production, exchange, and thought were honed in ways that resisted domination by states and ruling classes (Fiskesjö, this handbook). Some of these communities might have originated as runaways from oppressive state projects (Scott 2009), but many others had been in the hills for as long as their oral history can remember (Wouters 2011). Such highland oral histories, to be sure, are usually much deeper than the written histories that exist about them. This is partly because of their own predilection towards orality, rather than literacy, as the medium of history and cultural life, both in the nonstate past (Scott 2009: 220–237) and occasionally continuing into the present (Michaud 2020)[6] and partly because 'the highlands of Asia still attract little attention from historians' (Michaud 2010: 188). Especially so when compared to the rich intellectual and literary studies of lowland Sanskrit and Sino civilisations (but equally to the Pakistani, Tajik, Thai, Burmese, or Vietnamese archives) that surround them. Again other highland communities, at various moments in their political histories, expanded their territories and control down into the plains, often in search of land (see Gravers, this handbook) and in the process overran, subjugated, or peacefully co-existed with lowlanders. But whether empire-builders, state resistors, rebels, or runaways, Highland Asians have for centuries, and to the present, been skilled and successful practitioners of political worldmaking and have existed sometimes in active connivance and connection, but often out of joint with the worlds created by contemporaneous lowland states and powers.

Much changed with the rise and consolidation of the territorial state and nation as the near obligatory and modular categories of political space, sociality, and subjectivity (Wouters 2016). Many of contemporary states' outmost national borders are now delineated in Highland Asia. At first, these borders existed as mere lines on paper or a few seemingly stray boundary pillars erected in the landscape. They were the possession, in the words of Lord Curzon (1907: 5), viceroy of India, 'of a few silent men, who may be found in the clubs of London, or Paris, or Berlin, when they are not engaged in tracing lines upon the unknown areas of the earth'.

Gradually, however, these borders were translated into the landscape through gates, fences, border patrols, custom offices, officers, and technologies of surveillance. What this sought to confirm was the hegemonic presence of nation-states and fixed territorial borders. It was in this process that the highlands became, more firmly than ever before, enclosed and split into distinct national polities, turning highlanders into borderlanders of (formally) mutually exclusive identities (see the chapters in this handbook by Chophy, on the Naga, and Zou, on the Zo, about the complexities and contestations that grow when political borders cut across ethnic spaces).

As it stands, Highland Asia now traverses no fewer than 16 nation-states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, China, Mongolia, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.[7] In all of these states, highlanders have a noteworthy presence, yet they often find themselves politically marginalised. Notable exceptions here include Nepal and Bhutan, whose capital cities of Kathmandu and Thimphu are located in highland valleys. Following their definite but varied state enclosure, recent history witnessed Highland Asians as much defying structures and processes of political–economic integration (e.g., secessionist movements, revolts, ethnonational uprisings, indigeneity, illegal trade) as being – willingly or unwillingly – complicit in their construction (e.g., capitalist integration and enthusiasm, connectivity infrastructure, alliances to lowland centres, resource extraction).

What remains evident, however, is that global integrationist forces have not generally led to a 'flattening' of Highland Asia. Highland alterity continues to fan out and reveals itself, for one thing, in continued divergent worldings, cultural mediations, and expressions of modernity that emerge out of negotiations, appropriations, entanglements, and interruptions of world-historical processes. In all of this, the contention of this handbook is that the world as it is lived, experienced, and seen from a hilltop in, say, Badakhshan, Baltistan, Tawang, Kachinland, Guizhou, Rangamati, or Tây Nguyên continues to look spectacularly different from a view from Kabul, Islamabad, New Delhi, Naypyidaw, Beijing, Dhaka, or Hanoi.

Highland Asia as a world region

Highland Asia has to be thought, reasoned, and written into being. As a world region, after all, it engenders no formal recognition, nor does it exist on the modern political maps that have come to undergird the study of human geography in Asia (as anywhere). Highland Asia also lacks academic backing. One cannot be a student of Highland Asia in the same way as one can sit for modules, seminars, and examinations, write a thesis, obtain a degree, and carve out a career in ways one could in ancient or modern Chinese, Indian, Tibetan, or Southeast Asian studies.

Mapmakers, as the modern commanders of spatial representation and authority, are part of the cover-up, wittingly or unwittingly.[8] Open any atlas, whether published in India, China, Europe, or Russia, but a map of Highland Asia is unlikely to appear in any. Instead, you will find this region amputated and dissected into separate pages, the result of recurrent 'cartographic surgery' with highland patches emerging here, vanishing there, ever located at maps' outer edges where they typically 'disappear into the folds of two-page spreads, or end up as insets' (Van Schendel 2002: 651–652).

The maps you do find are Euro-American style political maps whose explanatory episteme is national territories and whose fetish is the precise points where different state sovereignties intersect on the Earth's surface. Other ways of visualising and representing territory are possible but rarely practised, such as through cosmographs, time-mythological and sacred representations, topography, pilgrimage itineraries, trade connections, military conquests, mountain passes,

and climatic zones. Each such 'alternative' map would invariably bring (in whole or in parts) Highland Asia into clearer focus. It is only the conventional political gridmap that withholds such recognition. And this is something to think about.

One such thought is that the general absence of such maps is indicative of the hegemony of the state, a hegemony that is epistemologically (and unapologetically) political and whose effect is to naturalise body politics, valorise nations, and regulate political economies The diagnosis? An embodied affliction, experienced by individual and national bodies alike, namely anxiety: a 'cartographic anxiety' (Krishna 1994) that variously manifests itself through cartographic 'aggression' (de Blij 2012), 'embraces' (Billé 2016b), hopes and fears (Saxer 2016), and nostalgic remembrances and longings (Callahan 2010). The anxiety here, writes Billé (2016a: 2), is 'not concerned with human appropriation or utilization, but with definition; to be a fully sovereign nation, all borders must be defined and incontestable.' Any cartographic mooring of Highland Asia would challenge such definitions.

In terms of institutional and intellectual anchoring, scholarship on Highland Asia, while on the swell, remains comparatively scant, with the bulk of national/regional research focus and funding, PhDs, and projects being habitually absorbed by universities in more populated national heartlands. Highland scholars, in turn – indigenous and nonlocal alike – must await coffee breaks during regional conferences to exit their respective country/area-wise panels to briefly huddle together to discuss matters of highland interest. Following Willem van Schendel's (2002) remedial coinage of Zomia as a crosscutting area, change is now afoot, however (more below); change this handbook facilitates further.

Reasons that for long detained our social imagination and narrowed intellectual precincts to state and academic areas are complex and varied, but the origins of which generally lie in colonial, Cold War, and national visions of the modern world, constituted through a neatly arranged assortment of territorial nation-states, followed by the annealing of this 'national order of things' (Malkki 1995), of all things: peoples, animals, natural resources, technology, science, knowledge, and imagination. It was during the epoch of imperialism that, what Edmund Leach (1960) called, the 'European myth' of Cartesian and cartographic borders was first injected into Highland Asia. At first, as noted, these lines were more political folly, known to exist by few and buttressing no sovereignty – across Asia, as theorists ranging from Tambiah and Geertz to Leach and Scott noted, sovereignty was traditionally not territorial but variously galactic, theatrical, monastic, concentric, interpenetrating, or wholly absent. It was the rise to hegemony, over the past two centuries, of the territorial nation-state as the standard unit of sovereignty, a process hyphenated through decolonisation and the Cold and other wars, through which this 'European myth' metastasised, in the upshot narrowing epistemic realities, alike to local populations, scholars, and funding agencies of many kinds.

Like schizophrenia, whose patients hear voices and interpret reality abnormally, many a postcolonial and millennial historian, political scientist and anthropologist suffered from hallucinations with the voices of the Durands, Holdichs, McMahons, Radcliffes, Curzons, and Doudart de Lagrées – all colonial officers variously involved in the drawing of boundaries – of colonial cartography and governance possessing their minds and blurring their views of sociospatial reality. As human constructions forced onto the Earth's surface, political borders are, of course, anywhere unnatural, artificial, and arbitrary. They are certainly arbitrary in Highland Asia, where mostly drawn by officials high on political expediency, they variously dissevered longstanding attachments, affinities, affiliations, and affects between peoples and places. Further, they tied the political destinies of those historically less mutually affectionate, often based on a lowland-highland divide, whether this was through the Afghanistan-Pakistan, Indo-Burma, Indo-Bangladesh, China-Vietnam, or the Thai-Lao border. The upshot? That modern political,

regional, and academic regimes have long worked to undermine sociospatial awareness of Highland Asia as a connected space, a longstanding failure of imagination and awareness that this handbook hopes to undo.

Linking the massifs

To think of Highland Asia as a world region means to connect extant transborder scholarship on its three main massifs – the Central Asian Highlands, the Greater Himalayan Region, and the Southeast Asian Massif, including Southwestern China – and in so doing, to consider broader connections of highland contexts, consciousness, and intentionality in novel and fresh ways. Within their respective massifs, this scholarship was a creative source of intellectual innovation by linking areas and communities previously confined to the compartments of nation-states. Yet, these bodies of massif-wise literature have rarely been brought into explicit conjunction before (notable recent exceptions include Michaud (2010) and Kreutzmann (2012a,b)).

Fundamental and constitutive of the emergence of transborder highland scholarship in Southeast Asia is Jean Michaud's oeuvre, but especially his *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*, published in 2006 and updated in 2016. This dictionary marks a first in its explicit adoption of a transborder frame to present and relay a range of Southeast Asian and Southwest Chinese upland societies and to draw connections and comparisons between them. Across political regimes and when official vernaculars are translated into English, these highland communities are variously designated as hill tribes, highlanders, mountain people, Scheduled Tribes, ethnic nationalities, minority nationalities, and national minorities (and, in international fora, by their conjugation of indigenous peoples); labels that allude to their existence apart from national mainstreams. They also, Michaud explains further, were (and still are) scarcely known outside their immediate home regions, the recipients of marginality of all kinds, and politically dominated by the ruling elites of surrounding lowlands. In connecting these polities, Michaud's work (2006; but also 1997; 2009; 2016; 2017) and kindred scholarship (e.g., Sprenger 2013; Sadan 2013) display affinity with extant trends in mainland Southeast Asian historiography that connect the great lowland corridors – hitherto victims of fragmented scholarship – to emphasise its shared historical trajectories, as well as stress the synergy and parallels between these histories and world history (Lieberman 2003; 2009).

Travelling west and crossing the highlands of Bangladesh and Northeast India (which were not part of Michaud's initial dictionary but included in the expanded 2016 edition on the grounds of historical, cultural, and linguistic affinities), we encounter Toni Huber's (2020) *Source of Life: Revitalisation Rites and Bon Shamans in Bhutan and the Eastern Himalayas* and Sara Shneiderman's (2015) *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between Nepal and India*. Their scholarship is part of the academic bridge between upland Southeast Asia and the Central Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. Having feasted on their rich accounts of ritual cultures and ethnic rituals, we continue our journey westward to find an early, now almost forgotten, book that was well ahead of its time, namely James Fisher's (1978) compendium titled *Himalaya Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*. The foreword is by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, a Trans-Himalayan fieldworker pur sang, with celebrated monographs on the Naga (1939), Apatani (1962), and the Sherpa (1964). In 1975, Fürer-Haimendorf published his cross-ethnographic *Himalayan Traders: Life in Highland Nepal* (1975). In it, he unravels the apparent paradox that peoples of the high, infertile, and inhospitable mountains were conspicuously wealthier compared to the communities of the lower and agriculturally more prosperous regions. The explanation for this was trade, particularly the exchange of Tibetan salt from the north with Nepalese grain from the south. This trade, however, largely ceased with the sealing of the Tibet border in 1959, as the result

of both the Chinese occupation and the increased connectivity between India and Nepal (see Bauer 2004; Spengen 2000; Bishop 1990; and Gurung and Bauer, this handbook).

In his foreword, Fürer-Haimendorf insisted that the broader Himalaya region should be considered a legitimate unit of anthropological study in view of the high mountains imposing a similar environmental framework on peoples living in their shadow, as well as because of the ancient Trans-Himalayan trade routes connecting distinct mountain regions (see also Wouters 2019). James Fisher, in the introduction that follows, paints the Himalaya as the 'Indo–Tibetan interface', straddling, as it does, two of the world's major cultural areas, namely South and Central Asia (one might add the Sinitic world as well). In this 'neither–fish–nor–fowl contact zone' (1978: 1), he writes,

> the peripheries of these enormous, complex regions meet, combine, and collide in the nooks and crannies of the world's highest mountain mass. The Himalayas, thus, are not so much a boundary, border, or buffer, as a zipper which stitches together these two densely textured cultural fabrics.
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> *(ibid.: 2)*[9]

Typical themes and debates that claimed centre stage in *Himalayan Anthropology* at that time include kinship classifications (Allen 1978), hierarchy and stratification (Caplan 1978), multi-ethnic (Nitzberg 1978) and intercaste (Toffin 1978) relations, Tibetan oracles, written about by the royal-cum-anthropologist Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark (1978), and the 'abominable snowman' (Siiger 1978).

The westernmost entry in *Himalayan Anthropology* is on the Afghan Pamirs, written by Nazif Shahrani. A central thread in Shahrani's wider scholarship is to see nomadism in the Pamirs as at once a subsistence strategy and a political ploy that permits small communities 'to avoid domination [by surrounding states and ideologies] by moving out of reach, a strategy that they have followed for centuries' (1978: xxviii). This now reads as an early precursor of James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* that popularised an affinal argument for another part of Highland Asia.

The bridge between the Himalayas and the Pamirs is the larger Kashmir borderland, straddling the contested Indo-Pakistan border, and a contact zone where cultural and religious traditions of South Asia, including Sanskrit teachings, meet those of various parts of Central Asia, ranging from Tibet to Iran (Bouzas 2019; see also Gupta, this handbook). From the vantage of geopolitics, this borderland is also a military contact zone where the vying nuclear superpowers of Pakistan, India, and China variously conflict, compete, and connive over territory and influence; a reminder that developments in Highland Asia have a political carrying power that stretches far beyond the region itself (on geopolitical relationships in Highland Asia, especially in relation to Tibet, see Plachta and Murton, this handbook).

The larger Pamirs, too, have long been a corridor and contact zone between different cultural influences, as is documented and detailed in Hermann Kreutzmann's trilogy, namely *Pamirian Crossroads: Kirghiz and Wakhi of High Asia* (2015), *Wakhan Quadrangle: Exploration and Espionage During and After the Great Game* (2017), and *Hunza Matters: Bordering and Ordering Between Ancient and New Silk Roads* (2020). In each of these treatises, covering past and present, the geographical foci are the high plateaus and steep valleys of the Pamirs and the Karakoram that transect the borders of present-day Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China and so to negate the Cold War split in scholarship, communication, and exchange of ideas in this region.

The imperative of linking empirical scholarship on these three massifs is, to be sure, not to draw their threads into what might pretend to be a unified approach, narrative, or theory from

Highland Asia. This region's internal variation prohibits any attempt toward theoretical flattening and philosophical steamrolling. Yet, what linking scholarship and perspectives from these three massifs might usefully achieve is, first, finding new departures in terms of our geographical imagination, the production of scholarly space, and the spatialisation of social theory. Second, and relatedly, it allows for the drawing of the kind of comparisons that have long proven fruitful to capture uniqueness and generality, similarity and difference, emplacement and mobility, such as in Kreutzmann's (2000) edited volumes, first on irrigation and water management in the Hindu-Kush-Karakoram-Himalaya, followed by a 2012 volume on modern-day pastoral practices that includes entries from the Eastern Hindu-Kush to Western Tibet. More broadly, what such comparative insights, across massifs, enable is crosscultural research to identify patterns, apprehend how and why highland societies are similar or different from each other; and this ultimately to arrive at a clearer understanding of the many phenomena that together constitute life in Highland Asia; to theorise, that is, not just on, about, or towards but also *from* and *with* the highlands.

Zomia perspectivism

The impetus and inspiration for this project owe much to the concept of Zomia, a term introduced by Willem van Schendel in 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia' (2002); taken for a wild spin as a region of reactionary state-lessness by James C. Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009); and then pruned, racked, and blended by Jean Michaud, particularly in 'Editorial – Zomia and beyond' (2010). The territorial hold of Zomia, however, remains up for debate and interpretation. What Scott (2009), who adopted the term and gave it popularity, defines as Zomia, broadly aligns to the Southeast Asian Massif and Southwestern China and does not match Van Schendel's (2002) initial proposition that extends it further westwards, including the Central Himalaya and parts of Central Asia. It is again different from what Michaud (2010) captured as Zomia+, which spreads much deeper and wider into Central Asia, firmly including the Pamirs; a proposition that is closest to our broad framing of Highland Asia.

With the geographical label of Zomia, Van Schendel questioned the spatialisation of social theory as organised, first, through a deeply entrenched 'methodological nationalism' (see Gellner 2012) that made scholarship coalesce with national heartlands from which dependent arteries spread into the highland borderlands. This was akin to a scholarly mandala in which areas further afield progressively acquire analytical autonomy yet in their final evaluation, relate and theorise back to a centre. At the regional level, second, Van Schendel questioned 'area studies', which he exposed as the politically implicated academic division of Asia, presenting it as the academic equivalent, in Asia, of the infamous Scramble for Africa by imperial powers. What had emerged, consequently, were distinct institutional and ideational domains, each with their own intellectual lineages, canons, and specialists; discrete scholarly universes, in sum, whose members speak mutually unintelligible languages. Asian highlands were typically caught, convicted, and sentenced to a liminal status between these areas as buffer zones, a liminality of academic belonging that turned most of Highland Asia into sustained 'geographies of ignorance'.

In response, Van Schendel breathed Zomia into being in essence to both challenge and reassure area studies scholars straight-jacketed by an institutionally calcified vision of the world that took its shape amid processes of decolonisation at the end of the Second World War and was further reified during the Cold War; a vision that seemed to reflect less and less their fieldwork realities. For one, the predominant 'heartland' vantage points obscured the important

particularities of 'peripheries'. By redirecting the focus towards the margins of nation-states, indeed to their frontiers and borderlands, one discovers spaces that bring into focus many cultural, economic, cosmological, and political encounters essentially invisible to state-centric analytics. The possibilities inherent in 'jumping scale' in search of new conceptual terrains more in line with global flows and transnational networks offer new possibilities of knowing, seeing, and thinking. Beyond heuristics, however, Van Schendel offered a concrete example and indeed proposed a name for it.

Van Schendel found purchase in the indigenous term 'Zomi', meaning 'highlander' in Chin, Kuki, and Mizo languages in the Burma-Bangladesh-Indian borderlands (Van Schendel 2002: 653), rendering the term 'Zomia' 'embarrassingly localized' (Michaud 2010: 199). The adding of the 'a' suffix was perhaps a move intended to clear any doubts regarding its residence within the well-established area studies genus; as such, 'Zomia' was not iconoclasm as much as perspectivism. The idea was to take the area studies institutional scaffolding upriver and allow the model to take root at the edges. James Scott adopted and capitalised on Van Schendel's epistemic opening by devising an anarchist history for Zomians. Scott galvanised academia around a new idea, one that put on trial the ostensible interdependence of 'civilisation' and 'state', by arguing that highlanders in Zomia were not so much left behind by civilisation as consciously seeking to avoid it. In this, Scott transposed the intellectual paradigm of Pierre Clastres' *Society Against the State* (1989) to the Southeast Asian uplands, as well as – implicitly and yet to be explored – suggested a political linkage between Zomia and Amazonia, where Clastres drew his insights from.

Scott's central thesis that the 'stateless' hill people in Zomia were refugees of the state, indeed fleeing military conscription, taxes, and so on, seemed to resonate particularly with Western progressives disillusioned by the disintegration of the welfare state and unable to articulate a coherent response to neoliberal capitalism. The concept of Zomia, spurred by the notion of intentional statelessness, seemed to grow another set of teeth as theorists across disciplines began to apply the concept in areas and communities beyond what was originally intended. Recent years saw the idea and idiom of Zomia signified, stressed, and stretched, so much so that it unrooted itself from Van Schendel's initial theorising and began to live a life of its own (Longkumer and Heneise 2019). Indeed, it is now possible to talk not just about 'the Zomia' but also about Zomian approaches (see the chapters by Smyer Yü and Tamang, this handbook) and about 'a Zomia', i.e. any place, wherever it may be, whose inhabitants purposefully seek to keep the logic and rule, and oppressions and extractions, of state and capital away, be they members of Occupy Wall Street in New York, Sentinelese tribesmen in the Andaman, Roma nomadic itinerants in Europe, evasive islanders in the Sundarbans, Amazonian or Papua New Guinean communities blocking the arrival of bulldozers, or insurgent outfits maintaining camps in the Indo-Burma borderland.

Now nearly two decades after Van Schendel first coined the term, the gradual ingress of oxygen has allowed us to address the more astringent critiques, and a rich corpus of Zomia research now available allows us to stand back, take stock, note its faults, but ultimately reflect on how it relates to, or informs, new configurations of space and spatialisation, including that of Highland Asia.

Methodologies for Highland Asia

Zomia perspectivism also inspired methodological innovations. What Zomia insights challenged was a longstanding tradition of historical and ethnographic studies that focused on single ethnicities or tribes and their supposedly narrow worlds, then supplanted this with scholarship that offered new readings of old sources and contemporary ethnographies forefronting flows,

circulation, and connectivities. As part of this process, attention shifted from places to passageways, from fixity to flows, from territory to trade, from disruptions to diversions, and from 'borders as barriers' to 'borders as opportunities'. The latter resulted in a view of highland boundaries as complex and porous crossborder spaces and practices (Horstmann et al. 2018) where life and relations across are shaped by *The Art of Neighbouring* (Saxer and Zhang 2016). These crossborder neighbours can be variously close or distant, cordial or competitive, cooperative or conflictual, but as neighbours, like kin, they cannot deny each other's existence. They must inevitably enter into relations and imbricate into each other's lives, irrespective of state regimes that either encourage or proscribe active neighbouring.

In this process, too, earlier spatially 'bounded' fieldwork gave way to multisited ethnography, including walking, driving, biking, and hitchhiking ethnographies along the Pamir or Karakorum Highways (Kreutzmann 2020; 2015; Mostowlansky 2017; Rippa 2015), the traversing of trails of capital and concessions (of territory, of sovereignty) (Nyiri 2002; 2017; Rippa 2019), the Appadurai-inspired approach of following a 'thing' (1986), be it jade (Møller 2019), wool (Harris 2017), amber (Rippa and Yang 2017), cowries (Deyell 2010), or buffalos and clothes (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). Yet another trend is the reading and reconstruction of historical connections through ruins, rubble, and remnants (Chhetri and Eilenberg 2019; Saxer 2016). All of the above connotes methodological innovations that seek to capture the tangled linkages between places, peoples, and things.

To be sure, this focus on flows does not suggest that flows flow freely (Cederlöf and Van Schendel 2022). As always, mobility is anchored in landscape features and embodied in human relations, while borders themselves are by no means obsolete, and state presence and restrictions can be felt acutely in borderland spaces – although often only so in certain parts of the border and at certain times of the day. What these new methodological approaches and thematic foci crucially achieve, however, is the unwrapping of state wraps of space and time, the disrupting of national reflexes, the unbounding of earlier bounded intellectual universes, and ultimately the rethinking of space, scales, and socialities across Highland Asia.

To be sure, to now 'elevate' Highland Asia into a distinct field of study should patently not imply the enactment of a new area with precise boundaries patrolled by high academic boundary walls, complete with jagged shards of broken glass that long characterised the 'old' area studies, or to argue that ways of living and 'being' in the region are formed and sustained in primordial isolation from adjacent lowlands. Instead, what it enables, returning to Van Schendel (2002: 651) is the possibility to reconsider 'the contexts, boundaries, and types of knowledge associated with the scramble for the area [studies]', to bring inter- and intra-regional linkages and patterns rather than regional identities into focus, and ultimately theorising from the highlands.

Thinking and theorising from and with Highland Asia

Combine all of the above: approaching highlanders as actors of global history and political designers *sui generis*, the linking of the massifs and Zomia perspectivism, and new methodologies, and the cumulative knowledge value should be fresh and grounded theory-making that is not just 'on' or 'about' but also *from* and *with* the highlands. However, our comparative and theoretical apparatuses have been slow to catch up with the fresh highland ethnographic and other insights to be explained. What significantly thwarts such theoretical developments is the stubborn salience of the hill-valley/highland-lowland binary as a prime analytical trope, in the sense that most comparisons and theories continue to be developed in the lowlands and from where they are extended into the highlands, either to confirm or critique these theories. In this way, highland historical and ethnographic data have long been treated akin to erosion or

mining, with them being extracted to feed the ever-hungry power grid of lowland hubs of social theory. Said otherwise, akin to the ways in which the highlands are currently incorporated into the capitalist market, which is as a supplier of raw material, scholarship has long mined the highlands for raw data to test and illustrate theories from elsewhere. Thus, most social theorising is constructed and channelled through the lowland-highland binary, and this ultimately keeps in place the centrist, lowland ontology as the designer label of social theory.

James Scott's elegy for a vanished world is a case in point. For all the welcome creativity and agency *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) writes into the lives of highlanders, Scott takes as his loci lowland states from whose oppressions peoples then fled to the hills. In that manner, highlanders remain projected, first and foremost, as reactionaries, rebels and refugees rather than as philosophers and worldmakers in themselves. Secondly, it configures the highlands as the second-best option to live rather than a preferred place of dwelling (Karlsson 2019), an argument that would be immediately rejected by most highlanders and, indeed, sits uneasily with the stories they tell themselves. From this vantage, Scott's grand narrative is part of a wider predicament in which highland societies are evaluated through dominant lowland ontologies of civilisation, culture, progress, development, and thence social and political theory. Consequently, highland societies end up depicted in a vocabulary of 'absence', 'lack', 'deviance', and as the recipients of concepts and theories, not as their repositories and enactors. It is indeed time, as Michaud (2020: 250) argued,

> to take a step back and think outside the box of the most convenient explanations some find attractive, fixated on fragmentation ('too many dialects', 'no common history'), tribalism ('lack of', 'pre-something') and social evolutionism ('not yet', 'not quite'), or romanticism '(it's in their blood').

One pathway out of this theoretical morass is to explicitly recognise the potent presence and generative processes of altitude on social life and make this to bear on our theory-making. Across both space and time, Fürer-Haimendorf (1981: ix) argued, 'mountain people' have had distinctive lifestyles and normative values compared to lowlanders. This assertion, he continued, is not based on the 'assessments of outside observers intent on dividing ethnic groups into neat categories.' Quite on the contrary, 'a recognition of their separateness prevails among many communities inhabiting regions of high altitude, and similarly, the peoples of the plains are usually conscious of the different nature of any mountain dwellers with whom they may regularly come into contact.' Yet, our social theorising does not yet adequately reflect this highland distinctiveness.

To remedy this, we can take a cue from Jean and John Comaroff's *Theory from the South* (2012), in which they take issue with the ways in which Euro-American theory and thought has long engaged the Global South (the formerly non-West), which is:

> primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means. Above all, of unprocessed data. These other worlds, in short, are treated less as sources of refined knowledge than as reservoirs of raw fact: of the minutia from which Euromodernity might fashion its testable theories and transcendent truths.
>
> *(2012: 114)*

What would happen, the Comaroffs ask, if we invert this 'Order of Things', if we 'subvert the epistemic scaffolding' and hence 'approached theory work from a primary Africa vantage?'

What pertains to the Global South, especially the African continent, equally applies to the highlands, which have long been subjected to views from the lowland, rather than treated as a

place of 'refined knowledge' and theorising. As such, our theorising should not just travel south, as the Comaroffs argue, but also upwards, and once in the highlands also sideways, rather than just down again. Of course, this is not to argue that ways of living and being in the highlands are formed and sustained in isolation from adjacent lowlands. Far from it. It is to assert, rather, that Highland Asian studies have considerable conceptual and theoretical potential and relevance beyond the existence of lowland societies and ontologies.

Many domains of both the everyday and the good life, indeed, change when the landscape elevates. Take caste, that signifying trait of Hinduism but whose social implications, within Hindu society, dwindle when the landscape rises, slopes steepen, irrigated lands become scarcer, and higher castes find fewer reasons to settle. In fact, Subba (1989: 137) posits for the Eastern Himalaya: 'the high castes are generally not seen above 5,000 feet above sea level unless there are facilities for education, trade and communication'. Or take highland generative modes of production and exchange and their politicomoral undergrowth. Illustrative of these are 'escape agriculture' and 'escape crops' (Scott 2009), moral economies of subsistence (Scott 1976), culturally distinct modes of forging solidarity through sharing – of rice-beer (Fiskesjö 2010b), of betel-nut (Misra 1990). Or take 'prestige economies' (Lehman 1989), socioeconomic regeneration through upland swidden cultivation (Sprenger 2006a), and 'feasts of merit', particularly pronounced among the Naga, that linked morals, merit, and status to generosity (Wouters 2015b; Fürer-Haimendorf 1939). Take also the 'fields on the hoof' by nomadic pastoralists at higher altitudes and whose physical mobility corresponds to mobile and fluid social structures (Ekvall 1983). Or again, take the style and substance of preferred leadership; among the Kirghiz, a successful Khan was he who kept the government away and promptly guided his people higher into out-of-the-way mountains when this failed (Shahrani 2002). In all of the above, altitude is not an inert background but the manifest emplacement and constitutive force of the social, political, and moral order.

What this, and countless other highland social phenomena, call for is a dialectical synergy between landscape gradients and our theoretical gradients; to recognise, indeed, that altitude and ecological niches generate onto-epistemological niches. Not, of course, in a wholly deterministic sense a la Marvin Harris' (1971, 1975) old ecological model of cultural materialism (see also Shneiderman 2010) or by approaching the evolution of highland life in primordial isolation, but in ways that recognise how highland geophysics, sentience, and affordances have never been dissociable from its inhabitants' varied social constitution and politicomoral logic. James Scott (2009: 262) calls this the 'hegemony of ecology' and forefronts ecological niches as a critical condition for ethnogenesis (see Smyer Yü, this handbook). This insight adds to a distinctive body of scholarship that shows how spatial 'verticality' (Van Schendel 2018) is never an irrelevant or inert background to structures of kinship and community (Leach 1954), agriculture and corresponding forms of social organisation (Burling 1965), political positioning (Shahrani 1979; Scott 2009; Guite 2019), and ritual and meaning-making activities (Shneiderman 2015).

At its most basic, theorising from and with the highlands entails recognising the generative potency and power of highland living, the unique worlding practices engaged in by its inhabitants, and the refracting of global history and contemporary world processes through the prism of the highlands. Relatedly, it requires seeing highland communities not as reactive, reactionary, rebelling, derivative, or as 'lagging behind', as has been the fallacy of much theorising but, per contra, as worldmakers and enactors and repositories of their own visions and versions of sociopolitical life, both past and present. Highlanders do so in a vibrant array of forms and that now variously co-exist – sometimes in collaboration, sometimes in conflict, sometimes through cultural critique and creativity, and always in dialectical interplay – with modern and dominant regimes of exterior state and governance, power and knowledge, and capitalist conditions and connectivities.

At stake here is a call for an onto-epistemic re-orientation and grounded theory by looking at life projects and world-historical processes from the long ignored, often misrepresented and misunderstood, and variously suppressed highland margins of contemporary nation-states, and so in ways that critically appreciate the agency and 'relational awakeness' (Orr 2012) of its landscape, its humans, and other-than-human inhabitants. Doing so entails, on the one hand, the refracting of global history through the prism of Highland Asia and, on the other, approaching Highland Asia as a generative space of history and future visions; a space, in sum, that both refracts and generates. This is a programmatic turn this handbook hopes to initiate and contribute to.

Analytical vistas

There are countless vantages and vistas through which Highland Asia can be introduced and brought alive, ranging from classic themes such as kinship, kingship, personhood, transhumance, structure and change, or religious iconography and usually informed by place-based ethnography, to recent analytical and analogical emergences such as the Animist sphere (Smyer Yü 2020), reactionary statelessness (Scott 2009), Zomia (Van Schendel 2002), interspecies relatedness (Govindrajan 2018), dreamscapes (Heneise 2019), ethnicity (Shneiderman 2015), borderlands (Gellner 2014), and frontier livelihoods (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015), gendered history (Sadan and Maran, this handbook), capitalist desire and destruction (Wouters 2020), contact zone (Viehbeck 2017), protean landscapes (Cederlof 2014), environmental sustainability (Pandit 2017), and so on. Each of these analytical entries leads to fruitful insights that help trace and place Highland Asia as a world region, as well as make this region bear on global debates surrounding the contemporary human condition. In what follows, we forefront the analytic of 'highway', not in a narrow sense of tarmac driveways but in the broadest possible sense of systems through which circulate goods, knowledge, languages, meaning, power, abiotic matter and species, humans included.

A highway of many kinds

The summit of Mount Everest (known as *Sagarmatha* in Nepal, *Chomolungma* in Tibetan, and *Chumulangma Feng* in Mandarin) was once the floor of the Tethys Sea, an open waterway that separated the supercontinents of Laurasia and Gondwana. 'If by some fiat I had to restrict all this writing to one sentence', remarks the science writer John McPhee (1998: 124) in his acclaimed treatise on the movements of the surface of the Earth, 'this is the one I would choose: the Summit of Mt. Everest is maritime limestone'. Much of what we today refer to as Highland Asia was once a thriving ocean bed crowded, as palaeontologists established from fossils found on 'the roof of the world', with fish and other marine beings.[10]

The emergence of Highland Asia is one of the most radical geological and geomorphological revolutions that Earth has witnessed. More than that, it was generative of climatological conditions and diverse ecosystems across which life and matter moved and adapted in unique ways, producing both biodiversity and ethnogenetic hotspots. Like the formation of the Andes and Alps before it, the Himalaya and adjacent plateaus, highlands, and hills grew as the result of massive tectonic pressure and violence. This began some 50 million years ago with the continental collision of the Indian and Eurasian plates (and its microplates) that thrust, faulted, uplifted, and folded into jagged mountain crests, intermontane plateaus, and hill ranges, belts, spines, and spurs. Such tectonic processes continue and geology and ecology, here, must be written in the active voice, as ever in motion, and as tangled up with peoples and other kinds of being in diverse ways.

In a broad and structural geophysical sense, Highland Asia emerged through the Indian–Eurasian collision, with the additional pressure of the Pacific plate to the east, even as up close, Earth science tells, time periods of orogenic (mountain-building) episodes across the region differ in time, shape, and geological components. This Deep Time geological history includes the nodal orogenic uplift known as the Pamir Knot, from which radiate the Hindu-Kush, the Karakoram Range, the Kunlun Mountains, and the Tian Shan, which link with the Altai Mountains farther north. It is also constitutive of the sharp geological north-south bend of the Hengduan Mountains in China and for the ranges – resembling blades in a fan – that extends from the southeastern corner of the Tibetan Plateau into the Southeast Asian Massif, as it is for the rise of the Annamite Range that runs parallel to the Vietnamese coast but most of whose crests are located in Laos. All of these geological formations were subsequently sculpted by weathering and erosion, as well as by occasional earthquakes and volcanic activities (such as the basaltic lava flows that created the saucer-shaped Bolovens Plateau in Southern Laos), into their present (but still evolving) form.

As it matured and grew taller, the Himalaya became a life-giving and sustaining 'earth-being'.[11] Mount Everest, for one, is the sacred abode of Jomo Miyolangsangma, its resident female deity, whose virtue is that of inexhaustible giving. And inexhaustible giving is what Mount Everest never fails to do. Together with its sibling and cousin mountains, it has amongst the highest erosion rates in the world, is the source of some of the greatest rivers, and has the highest concentration of glaciers outside of the polar regions. The erosion of fertile top soil and snowmelt that long fed, and feeds, freshwater rivers (the Brahmaputra, Salween, Ganga, Mekong, Indus, and Irrawaddy rivers among them) fertilised vast expanses of lowland and allowed them to develop culture and sustain dense populations. The mountains, moreover, blocked the moist winds from the Southern Seas, which, in turn, intensified the monsoon rains on which production, prosperity, and with that, the political polities of, among others, the Indus Valley depended. In this way, surrounding kingdoms and civilisations borrowed their existence from the Himalayan uplift.

In all of this, geological time confronted later civilisational time in which lowland lifeways claimed to be, and were evaluated as, 'higher' on the ladder of culture and progress compared to the 'lower' levels of development and intellect associated with peoples of the highlands and mountains. For the longest time, those living 'up the hill' were maligned, feared, and othered as lagging behind in time and as the 'primitive'; as a supreme receptacle, that is, of otherness for lowlanders' own constructions of civilisation. The onset of this discourse is popularly associated with the twinning of colonialism and orientalism (Said 1978). But while colonialism certainly contributed to enduring views of such a civilisational ordering, in very many cases colonial officers and early ethnologists merely tapped into what were pre-existing views held by lowlanders, of highlanders as savage, barbarian, inferior, uncooked and raw, reckless, uncivilised, wild, warlike, and so on. During the colonial epoch, as well as during preceding eras, these descriptions carried out political work, whether by justifying punitive and cruel measures, rationalising repressive rule, or withholding civil rights. Such evaluations and stereotypes also did not vanish with the crumbling and retreating of empires but took on a new vigour in ways variously analysed in terms of 'tribalist discourse' for Bangladesh (Van Schendel 1992), 'home-grown orientalism' for India (Poddar and Subba 1992), and 'internal orientalism' for China (Schein 2000).

Motion was not only downward but also sideways, however. Well prior to human colonisation, Highland Asia functioned as a bridge for the exchange of biotas from different directions, turning it into an 'intercontinental biological highway' (Pandit 2017: 76–97). Later, Highland Asia also became a linguistic and genetic highway. Following the emergence of anatomically modern humans from Africa and their journey eastwards, the present Eastern Himalaya borderland,

including Bhutan and Northeast India, became an ethnolinguistic cradle and stage for the founding dispersal of major language families such as Trans-Himalayan (or Tibeto-Burman), Hmong-Mien, Austroasiatic, and Austro-Tai.[12] Hence, the 'Mongolian myth' in which ethnic tribal groups in this part of Highland Asia narrate, through their folktales and legends, their origins in ancient Mongolia draws more evidence in its inverse with peoples in Mongolia and China tracing their descent and dispersal, deep down, to the Eastern Himalaya (Van Driem 2014; 2016). Subsequent and successive waves of migration, in various directions to and fro, are thought to have now shaped the complex linguistic and genetic make-up of communities in this region today (Zhang et al. 2015; Manning 2015).[13]

In terms of the first settlement in the Tibetan Plateau and the Himalaya, a hypothesis allowed for by both human population genetics and historical linguistics is that it was from the Eastern Himalaya borderland and in the form of a large anticlockwise sweep through Southeast Asia and Northeastern China that early humans first arrived and settled in the Upper Yellow River region in contemporary China. This is also possibly where humans first domesticated rice (Van Driem 2017), and from where this grain spread and domesticated both humans and landscapes across Highland Asia and beyond. Perhaps it was because of population growth and/or conflict that followed settled agriculture and with that emergent private property regimes that some early humans began migrating further westwards and into the Tibetan Plateau, from where they filtered across the high Himalaya.

When seen from a wide historical lens, this suggests an early east-west migration of humans. But whereas Highland Asia thus became a bridge for east-west gene flows, it is simultaneously proffered that it long functioned as a barrier for south-north genetic drift and admixture (but not the other way around) due to terrain hard to surmount upward (Gayden et al. 2013). Recent genotyping of Himalayan and adjoining populations reveals a high level of affinity with East Asian populations rather than with South Asians, thus suggesting a broad divergence between genetic and contemporary political belonging. This is corroborated by linguistic evidence from the Trans-Himalayan language family, of which the vast majority of its speakers reside to the north of the Himalaya, even as most of the linguistic subgroups reside to the south and east (Van Driem 2018).

Flows and frictions

Apart from a biotic, linguistic, and genetic highway, parts of Highland Asia also became a passageway, 'pathway' (Saxer 2016), 'patchwork' (Ferguson 2006), and purpose of ancient trade routes, networks, and corridors. The nodes, rhizomes, arteries, and veins of these routes of exchange were many and varied, bigger and smaller, dominated by different commodities such as silk (Frankopan 2017), wool (Harris 2013a, 2017), opium (Trocki 1999), cowries (Yang 2011), copper (Marsden 2016), jade (Møller 2019), and tea (Sigley 2020). However, when followed through, they connected East and Southeast Asia with South Asia, Persia, the Arabian Peninsula, East Africa, and the Mediterranean. Archaeological findings, surviving scrolls, lore and oral histories, and scholarship in global history shed light on these ancient routes that were travelled by merchants, mercenaries, and monks, as well as by emperors, kings, army generals, envoys, and spies. As they travelled, met, mingled, married, and fought, they exchanged genes, crops and technologies, philosophies and religion, language and scripts, ideas and ideologies, diseases and medicines, animals and slaves, and items of very many kinds. These peoples, ideas, and goods traversed to, fro, and across parts of Highland Asia long before the year 1877, which is when the German geographer Baron Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen coined the term *Seidenstraße*, or what is better known in English as the Silk Road, to describe this network of age-old trade routes (Kreutzmann 2020; 2015; Waugh 2007; Van Schendel 2020).

There now exists extensive scholarship that documents and details ancient mobility across Inner-Asia, the Trans-Himalayan flows, and the histories of motion in the Indo-China-Burma corridor. Evidence of these ancient connections is unmistakable, whether it is the spread of Islam and Buddhism in China, the availability of Roman glassware in East Asia, and Chinese silk in Rome, the excavation of Corinthian columns in present-day Tajikistan, the presence of Himalayan aromatic oils and ointments in early Egypt, cowrie shells that made their way up to Yunnan, or the ancient flows of Indian cotton textiles, spices, and fragrances to China (Liu 1996; 2010; Deyell 2010; Cederlöf 2014; Van Schendel 2020).[14] At an even deeper, more provocative, level, this historical connectivity reveals itself in the comparisons to be found between the Greek and Hindu epics of the Odyssey and the Mahabharata, of whose numerous and precise parallels Nicholas Allen (2020: 254–255) says: 'there is little room for doubt. The only reasonable explanation is that the two epics go back to a common origin from which they diverged in the course of separate oral transmission'.

The list of items goes on, but the general point of which is that parts of Highland Asia, although often presented as remote, were long connected by flows and drives of humans and the objects, ambitions, knowledge, beliefs, and fears they carried with them. And this network – piecemeal, dispersed, and linking oases, caravan cities, steppes, depots, mountain passes, gates, and corridors – connected peoples and polities across large distances. Or, in the elegant phrasing of Colin Thubron (2008: 160), modern-day Silk Road traveller and writer, 'a distant disturbance at one end of the road trembled along its length like an electric current, so that the pressure of pastoral tribes along the Great Wall, in a relentless chain reaction, might unleash the Huns over Europe'.

Counter-representations of Highland Asia as historically isolated and out-of-the-way also exist. These reflect a more limited reading of history confined to the past few centuries. Particularly pronounced, in this modern history, were unprecedented territorial rivalries and clashes between British, French, Burmese, Chinese, and Russian forces. This was followed by postcolonial transformations and developments that jointly worked to reshuffle constellations of connectivity, remoteness, and isolation. In terms of imperial rivalries, probably the most well-known political and diplomatic confrontation was between Tsarist Russia and Victorian Britain over the mastery of Central Asia, control over which was seen as key to world dominion (Hopkirk 1990).

This so-called Great Game formally ended with the signing of the Pamir Boundary Commission protocols, followed by further territorial agreements. Many analysts, however, would insist that the Great Game in Central Asia never really concluded but only metamorphosed in later Cold War politics and their aftermath, in geopolitical struggles over influence and access to mineral resources, as well as in the contemporary 'war on terror', all of which can be read as a continuation of the Great Game by other means, strategies, and technologies, and with extra players added to it (e.g., Kreutzmann 2004). Others, and Bertil Lintner (2016) and Thant Myint-U (2011) in particular, contend that the Great Game has moved east and now unfolds between the geopolitical powerhouses of India and China, with Burma/Myanmar, and its enormous mineral resources, as the prime battleground.

One agreement that was part of the early Pamir Boundary Commission protocols was the creation of the Wakhan corridor, which now juts out of Afghanistan and stretches towards China, as a buffer between the Russian and British empires so that no boundaries would be shared between both adversaries (Kreutzmann 2017). What was once a main gateway of economic and cultural exchange, and for centuries part of the Silk Road, consequently turned into 'one of the most isolated and remote frontier areas of Afghanistan' (Shahrani 2002: xxxvii). Significant tracts of highland Northeast India and Burma/Myanmar endured a similar fate. Once the source

and corridor of substantial overland trade in mineral wealth (e.g., gold, copper, limestone, jade) and commercial articles (e.g., elephant tusks, silk, opium, lumber) between Southern China and Bengal, an escalating rivalry between the Burmese and British Empires, both expansionist, changed the region's fortunes. The first Anglo-Burmese war (1824–1826) – the most expensive and lethal war fought by the British in the Indian subcontinent – depleted large hill tracts, severed old trade networks, and emptied trading towns in the foothills.

After enforcing territorial limits on the Burmese Empire and securing suzerainty over what is today Northeast India, the British at first attempted to restore earlier highland trade networks and to foster the capitalist integration of British India with markets further east, particularly China. After this failed, not in the least because of fierce resistance by highland communities, the colonial government shifted its focus to tea cultivation in the plains and lower foothills, as well as adopted a series of policies, including a stringent Inner-Line regime (Kar 2009), that progressively sequestered the highlands, the latter becoming an insulated frontier of ungoverned, virtually autonomous tribes (Cederlöf 2013). It was thence through colonial intervention that these highlands became a frontier in the sense of 'an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet – not yet mapped, not yet regulated' (Tsing 2005: 28).

The changing fortunes of Wakhan and highland Northeast India are emblematic of how, in places across Highland Asia, remoteness and connectedness were hardly ever primordial conditions but oscillating manifestations, ever contingent on wider political and social processes (Harms et al. 2014; Saxer and Anderson 2019). In other places, it is the idea of remoteness that is actively constructed, and so amid historical connectedness, in pursuit of imaginaries of cultural authenticity and 'exotic' tourism, such as in highland Southeast Asia (Johnson 2007), or to reassert hegemonic images of a civilisational core and national identity that operates through difference and othering, as in the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau in China (Oakes and Zhenting, this handbook) and in contemporary Northeast India (Wouters and Subba 2013).

What remains central to historical dialectics between connectivity and remoteness was the drawing and closure of borders and the cutting off of old routes of exchange. These were the eventual outcome of most political rivalries, rebellions, and revolutions and turned into the epic of Highland Asia's modern geopolitical history. This is an epic of centres becoming margins and vice-versa, of corridors turning into remote frontiers, of mushrooming and mobile political borders, of increasingly ambitious and heavy-handed states coming eye-to-eye in the most unlikely of places (glaciers, mountain deserts, and forested hilltops) where they fence, trench, and garrison themselves in based on the firm belief that territorial sovereignty is best reproduced at the borders.

It is also an epic of continuously shape-shifting sociospatial relations and orientations. Whether it was the Second World War, Partition, the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Laotian revolutions, the Chinese annexation of Tibet, the Indian annexation of Sikkim, the Sino border conflicts (with the Soviet Union, India, Vietnam, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan), and India-Pakistan border conflicts, or the birth of Bangladesh, each of these episodes impacted political borders, territorial imagination, and sociospatial relations, as well as generated ever more complex geopolitics with its defining trait of sensitive spaces. On the ground, these macro-events and their territorial implications were subsequently pruned, poked, and pecked at by smaller regional revolts and ethnonational uprisings, as well as shaped by 'everyday forms of geopolitics' (Gohain 2020) and everyday flows and networks that variously opened, closed, challenged, and transcended political borders and state spaces (Van Schendel 2005).

All of this remains in flux. Like the recurrent landslides that serve as a daily reminder of a restless terrain, the geopolitical landscape, state, and border regimes of Highland Asia can be described as edgy, fidgety, and, when seen across time and space, as permanently impermanent,

forever rerouting, branching, and gravitating social relations and flows in new directions. When ancient routes of exchange fell into decline, other routes rose to prominence. When Trans-Himalayan pastoralists found their annual migratory routes closed and declared illegal by newly erected borders, they directed their herds to other pastures, although at the cost of escalating land pressure. And when thriving entrepôts and 'contact zones' turned into remote peripheries, its traders took their goods elsewhere (Giersch 2006; Harris 2013b).

To be sure, while state, borders, and mobility are closely intertwined across Highland Asia and over time worked to redirect and curb human mobility, state and border regimes are regularly defied on the ground as there always persisted countless flows and networks of both peoples and goods, territorial imagination and future visions that state and borders failed to control. In fact, an entire subdiscipline flourishes on studying precisely those 'transgressions', namely borderland studies (Van Schendel 2005). What this realisation prompted was the design of concepts and metaphors (i.e., rhizomes, webs, flows, fractals, process geography, networks, and of course, Zomia) to free scholarship from state-centred analyses.

What this body of scholarship demonstrated, in a word, is that newfound borders across Highland Asia (as anywhere) rarely function as impassable barriers, even when they are formally closed or contested by antagonistic states. More often, they operate as sieves: not in the sense of borders separating wanted elements from unwanted materials – very few, if any, borders are capable of doing so – but as a solid frame of offices, soldiers, laws, and regulations that actually is nevertheless porous and leaky as unregulated and unrecorded flows of peoples and items invariably pass through them. In state discourse, these flows came to be described in terms of illegality, infiltration, smuggling, and evasion, but they are nevertheless often considered licit and socially desirable by borderlanders (Van Schendel and Abraham 2006). Akin to the ever creeping Himalayan cryosphere, then, humans across Highland Asia have always been on the move, sometimes because of state regimes and border projects (i.e., Partition or the occupation of Tibet) and at other times in spite of these (i.e., continuous mobility in the Bengal or Burma/Myanmar-Thailand borderlands, despite such movements being declared illegal by the state).

Silk Road reincarnate

Whereas the 19th and 20th centuries constituted an epoch of comparative closure, the 21st century of Highland Asia is again presented in terms of connectivity, along the lines of Khanna's *Connectography* (2016) that see in a seamlessly integrated world of global capital, labour, and culture yet another 'end of history'. Invoked here, in particular, is the China-led One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and in the colloquial as the 'New Silk Road', that envisages a smoothly connected Eurasia where capital is constantly kept busy. The phrase New Silk Road was wrested from Hillary Clinton, who, as then-Secretary of State, coined it in 2011 to announce a United-States-led initiative in Afghanistan and Central Asia aimed at integrating the region and boosting its potential as a trade corridor between Europe and East Asia, an ambitious enterprise that never took off, or at least not in the way envisaged by the United States.

At face value, the New Silk Road may appear as the 21st-century refashioning of the ancient trade routes discussed in the previous section, but now without caravans and pack-animals and instead with roads and railways, ports and pipelines, airstrips and planes, and advanced communication technology, that seek to re-open spaces geopolitics sought to close. There are important differences, however. For one thing, unlike the Old Silk Road, on which movement and trade were, to an important degree, autonomous from state projects, the New Silk Road is China-conceived, organised, financed, and controlled (Van Schendel 2020). Hailed by the Chinese

Premier Xi Jinping as the 'project of the century', it is now incorporated into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China as the centrepiece of its foreign policy, thus promising an innovative cocktail of unremitting capitalism supervised by political communism. It is a cocktail that will be served, spiked with different flavours and sprinkles for different occasions, to places across Highland Asia and far beyond. It is a cocktail whose ingestion is expected to structurally transform landscape and life in Highland Asia.

What is planned, and in many places already well underway, is a China-constructed and controlled 'belt' and 'road'. Or rather, in the plural: belts and roads. 'Road' here refers to sea routes, also known as the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, mirrored on the exploits of the Chinese mariner, diplomat, admiral, and court eunuch Zheng He (c. 1371–1435), who commanded expeditionary treasure voyages from China to Southeast Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Western Asia, and East Africa. 'Belt', in turn, refers to an assemblage of overland routes for road and rail transportation that entails unprecedented capital investments in connectivity infrastructure to create several capitalist and commercial corridors. These include the Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor, the China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, the proposed – but rejected by India – Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM), and several other larger and smaller corridors, lanes, and bylanes. While the New Silk Road is undoubtedly the largest, most impactful, most capital-intensive project (ever) that is currently pursued, in its highland effects, it is part of a longer shift that James Scott captures through the analytic of 'engulfment.' He writes thus:

> The biggest post-war shift throughout Southeast Asia and China is '"engulfment" of the hills by moving land-hungry, demographically crowded, valley peoples, usually with state-help and capitalist financing for plantations, logging, mining – making "hill peoples" a minority in the hills and at the frontiers'.
>
> *(cited in Michaud 2017: 10)*

What is often overlooked in this project – and this is another difference vis-à-vis the Old Silk Road – are 'actually existing Silk-Roads' that, often against many odds, successfully connect different parts of China, and Asia, with Europe. Explains Marsden

> These Actually Existing Silk Roads should not be treated as informal and illegal and thereby inevitably a security threat or a risk. They are better thought of as monuments to the creative activity of people who have been poorly served by the nation-state and the international system over the past decades. It is in this context that they have built their own infrastructures, both for life and for commerce.
>
> *(2017: 30)*

These historical passageways and sociospatial configurations are however readily glossed over by the diplomatic and technocratic language the Chinese state espouses (see Van Schendel 2020) and from whose organs and mouthpieces the objectives of the BRI is

> to construct a unified large market and make full use of both international and domestic markets, through cultural exchange and integration, to enhance mutual understanding and trust of member nations, ending up in an innovative pattern with capital inflows, talent pool, and technology database
>
> *(see Clarke 2017)*

This is a euphemism – as many analysts see (and not a few fear) it – for geo-economic and geopolitical shifts that will witness China's jump to global hegemony.

The economic model pursued is infrastructure qua development, the dividends of which are pictured in terms of increased trade, investments, soft power, and overall capitalist integration, and of which China is the main beneficiary. As part of this vision, many highways and railways are currently being surveyed and engineered in Highland Asia, and it is the navigating and mastering of its mountains and its plateaus that is crucial to the New Silk Road's success. This now makes 'concrete' the dominant invasive species of the current epoch. While concrete is abiotic, it may nevertheless be approached as a species because roads 'are in life, enmeshing social worlds, environmental configurations, imaginaries and temporalities'. Rest and Rippa (2019: 374) continue:

> roads are the outcome of human planning, construction, maintenance, dis-engagement, as well as the site of contention, anxieties, and expectations. On the other hand, however, roads even before their material appearance, co-participate in the production of the social, political, environmental and spiritual worlds that they inhabit.

This, indeed, is what a now flourishing scholarship on highland infrastructure (and not just roads) reveals time and again: infrastructure is always a great deal more than mere material assemblages of concrete and iron; it is everywhere deeply enmeshed, entangled, and generative of social worlds, environments, myths, spiritual beings, and of politics (e.g., Khan 2006; Campbell 2010; Jensen and Morita 2019; Mostowlansky 2011; 2017; Rest 2012; Rippa 2019; 2018; Kreutzmann 2015; 2020).

Take Gilgit-Baltistan. Here, massive road-building projects as part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor are locally interpreted in terms of continuity (Kreutzmann 2020, chapter 2). It serves its inhabitants as a reminder of the political, economic, and cultural centrality and connectivity that they consider at the heart of their land and history, a connectivity that was disrupted as the result of its contested political status between postcolonial India and Pakistan. To them, these are roads that travel across old routes (Rippa 2018). Or visit Nepal to find that the New Silk Road is presented as a 'handshake across the Himalaya'. This handshake consists of enormous China-financed energy and infrastructure developments. The Chinese hand pulls Kathmandu away from Delhi, its longstanding political ally, and towards Beijing, thus expanding the Chinese sphere of influence. The Nepalese state, on its part, appropriates Chinese investment to support its national vision of *bikas* (development), the success and failure of which Nepalese citizens use to evaluate the legitimacy of the ruling government (Murton, Lord, and Beazley 2016). In Nepal, as in places across Highland Asia, infrastructure projects manifest themselves as a geopolitical version of a classic 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson 1990) in which the technical language and planned development obscure political intentions; in this instance, the expansion of the Chinese sphere of influence.

In the Lao highlands, meanwhile, the so-called Northern Economic Corridor, which was retroactively integrated, almost as an afterthought, in the New Silk Road narrative, produced new forms of exclusion of already marginalised communities (Dwyer 2020), while in Nepal's Karnali region, new roads actually increased vulnerabilities of many kinds. Here it was not earlier remoteness but new connectivities that caused food insecurity (Gurung 2021). In the Pamirs, the newly constructed highway has come to connote a Chinese 'presence without encounters' in Tajikistan. Particularly so in Murghab, which saw its status transformed from an earlier destination of Soviet provisioning to a contemporary thoroughfare of endless trucks, none of which stop in Murghab. This now leaves its inhabitants anxious as they await what

'Chinese futures' will hold for them (Saxer 2018). There are many more local case studies to discuss, all of which show that these new connectivity projects carry within themselves the potential to effectuate change, create and recreate space, shape and reshape social and political relations, and spur hopes, fears, and anxieties.

Such close-up perspectives and insights emanate from studying the New Silk Road not just in terms of large questions of political economy and geopolitics but also through 'views from the ground' (Oliviera et al. 2020). Besides chartering the side effects, as often anticipated as they are unanticipated, of infrastructure development, such bottom-up views also complicate images of the BRI as one of 'mutual development' and 'win–win' investments, the way China sells it. They further suggest that, at present, it remains too early to conclude the precise ways in which the New Silk Road will impact Highland Asia in the long run.

What early studies do suggest is that these impacts are likely to differ from place to place and, in all probability, will end up variously connecting, fragmenting, bypassing, resurging, polluting, and demolishing the highlands. In its extreme form, it is through the New Silk Road initiative that China will wield economic and military power and confidence that will see certain states such as Nepal, Bhutan, Burma/Myanmar, Laos, and Bangladesh struggle to remain politically neutral and likely spend much of their time and resources in staving off political interference. In this way, the Asian Highlands, so central to the New Silk Road, become the 21st-century equivalent of the Iron Curtain, dividing Asia between a Chinese hegemony encompassing Central, East and Southeast Asia and a South Asia allied and resourced by a dwindling West.

Epic highways and highland bards

The above kinds of political processes – rising state tectonics with new and more complex points of friction – are not unfamiliar in a landscape with a deep memory of imperial conquest. Indeed, the rise and fall of kingdoms and empires is a central narrative in Highland Asian myths and immortalised in the great epic poetry still narrated by travelling bards crisscrossing its many thousands of miles of roads and pathways. The pinnacles of Highland Asian artistry, these great epic poems, ritual storytelling, and the vast ecosystem of related genres combine strands of historical and genealogical knowledge with sacred knowledge. After all, these are narratives that articulate a human history deeply intertwined with invisible metahuman activity and interests. This is a history of human relations with the original owners of visible and invisible domains, to which humans are ultimately subject.

Here, powerful mountain deities, as well as landscape and species masters, and numerous other invisibles, are sometimes anthropomorphised in extensive highland operas. The characters in these great works appear as conquerors, maidens, tricksters, nobles, oracles, and kings but endowed sometimes with extraordinary powers. Aiding the bards, who are central figures in any epic performance, are the voices of the ancients themselves, teaching and mentoring the bards. From early initiation to the height of their mature careers, in dreams and in varying degrees and forms of possession, these voices are the bard's intimate companions. From a young age, a bard receives a calling dream or undergoes a sometimes anguish-filled initiation, after which the episodes within the vast repertoire are slowly learned. Performances of the extensive poetic verses over usually many days achieve mastery only when seamlessly coproduced by the bard and his or her invisible tutors. This centuries-old tradition is not lost on the many dignitaries and commoners that gather to hear these shadows speak, as the knowledge of the ancients espoused in the bard's song is symbolic power coming into being.

The storylines of many of Highland Asia's great epics vary but often involve the slaying of great demonic powers, battles over thrones, forbidden love, sacrifice, treachery, and battlefield

victories that culminate with great royal feasts. The narratives articulate value systems, laws, and political economies and, in this sense, prescribe governmentality or are a form of 'theatrical royalty' as suggested by David Graeber, as it rehearses or indeed 'comes before the real thing', namely human elaborations of the invisible political society (Hocart Lectures 2016). Highland Asia's many acephalous and egalitarian ethnic groups that ostensibly escape the state rather contend already with an all-encompassing, 'life-giving' and 'death-dealing' cosmic polity that resembles, and one might say precedes, the state (Sahlins 2017, 119).

The Manaschïs of Kyrgyzstan receive new episodes of the Manas epic in their dreams, and their mastery entails dream inspiration, as dreamless memorisation through human effort alone falls short of the 'real' with its seamless flow and intensity (Van der Heide 2015; also this handbook). Across Central Asia, there are as many as 50 *dastan* or oral epics performed by bards locally known as *ozan*, *aqin*, *irchi*, *jonokchu*, *zhyrau*, and *bakhshi*. These inspired performers journey to settlements large and small across vast distances, from the Eastern Altai mountains in Mongolia to the Ural mountains in Russia and as far south as the Hindu-Kush mountains in Afghanistan.

Across this vast terrain, we also hear myriad variations of perhaps the greatest oral tradition of them all, the 12th century epic of *Gesar*, its origins generally attributed to Tibet, the longform being over one million lines long across 180 episodes and at least 25 times the length of Homer's *Iliad*. They fan out into a broad 'ecology' of *Gesar*-related genres, micronarratives, and sites throughout the Himalayan region (Thurston 2019: 115) and influencing traditions in Hunza, Baltistan, Ladakh, across the Tibetan Plateau (see Gillian Tan, this handbook), and as far north as Mongolia, itself a cradle of *Gesar* and other great epic tales such as the 15th-century *Jangar* epic (Gejin 2001). *Gesar* has attracted the attention of UNESCO, the Chinese state, fostered a growing community of 'Gesarologists', in addition to scholars and translators the world over. This attention is in large part due to the staggering feats of the *Gesar* bards, or *sgrung mkhan*, the most famous said to be inspired by dreams – *bab sgrung* (lit. 'dream-inspired bards') – who, like the Manaschïs of Kyrgyzstan and other bards across Central Asia, consider the truest forms those reliant on the tutelage of invisibles they meet in dreams (Thurston 2019: 2).

In Northeast India, the interest and scale of documentation are not at the level of the Central Asian/Tibetan *Gesar*, Kyrgyz *Manas*, or Mongolian *Jangar*. However, the region's oral traditions span hundreds of upland ethnic groups, each with substantial catalogues and genre systems, including origin myths, ritual chants, migration legends, trickster tales, and oral histories. They often chronicle centuries of interclan history in ways the longform epics do not while also revealing complex ritual forms, prohibitions, and relations with neighbouring peoples (Blackburn 2008; Teron 2014; see also Teron and Bordoloi, this handbook). Among the Karbi of upland Assam, for example, the 13th-century *Kecharhealun* funerary epic spans at least 35 hours of chanted verse, usually performed over the course of several weeks, easily surpassing the Greek epics in length (Teron and Heneise, 2022). The *charhepi* dirge singer, often a woman, and healer, masters the epic's episodes chanted in medieval Karbi over the course of a lifetime. In addition to ushering the souls of the dead to the Karbi village of ancestors, the epic narrates ancient migration routes, relations with neighbouring kingdoms, the genealogies and relations between the main Karbi clan lineages, and includes an exhaustive catalogue of Karbi ritual practices, prohibitions, customs, and laws (Teron 2014).

In Southeast Asia, the relatively little known *Thao Hung* or *Cheuang* epic poem is a veritable archive of pre-Buddhist indigenous cosmology, practices, and knowledge. A wide-ranging account of the ancient Tai civilisation, the epic narrative recounts ceremonies in which celestial spirits are called down to Earth and in which elephants are used in sacrifice. Indeed, the *Cheuang* epic, according to James Chamberlain, is 'perhaps the most important piece of literature from

the Southeast Asian mainland, as monumental to the study of Southeast Asian civilisation as the *Ramayana* is to India or the *Iliad* is to the West' (1992: 14). Chamberlain states:

> To students of Southeast Asian literature, it represents a truly indigenous poetic epic, outstanding for its grand literary style and content, its poetic forms not found elsewhere in Thai or Lao literature, and its sheer size. For students of history, the work represents a detailed account of a place and period in Southeast Asian history that is a virtual vacuum in our knowledge, but a place and period that was undoubtedly the site of great upheavals as the pre-Buddhist Tais migrated westward from northern Vietnam through northern Laos, to northern Thailand, Burma, Yunnan, and Assam, conquering the older Austroasiatic populations as they went.
>
> *(1992: 14)*

Indeed, in Vietnam's highlands, oral epic performances remain popular forms of entertainment, and variations are found among various ethnic groups, such as the *H'mon* among the Bahnar; *Ot N'rong* among the M'Nong; the *H'ri* among the Jo Rai; and *Khan* among the Rhade (To Ngoc Thanh, 1982). The mythic verses of each *H'mon*, *Khan*, *H'ri*, or *Ot N'rong* epic may be anywhere between a thousand and ten thousand lines in length. The narratives are generally heroic journeys or acts performed by great and powerful heroes, often wielding supernatural powers. An important theme in these great highland operas of Vietnam's Truong Son range is the powerful resistance of foreign invaders and exploitation by means of great heroic and supernatural forces (To Ngoc Thanh 1982).

Performed on dark winter nights, often in the late evening until sunrise, the H'mon bard sits in the eastern room and, veiled by shadows, performs for the audience of villagers, usually sitting in the courtyard in groups and warming by a fire. The bard uses the darkness, the play of the firelight, and the dancing shadows to set the epic's scenes, using vocal techniques to bounce sound off surfaces to dramatic effect. Weaving in recitations, declarative pronouncements, and narration, with musical melodies, the bard plays each character in the epic and is in control of the narrative arc and phrasing. In three nights, the bard can manage the shortest version of the epic, while it may take 20 nights to complete the longest rendition, one that must be performed continuously, night after night (To Ngoc Thanh 1982).

All across Highland Asia, epic storytellers travel from village to village, town to city, drawing in new audiences, entertaining, but also teaching ever new audience about the ancient wisdom deeply imprinted in the vast landscapes, in the beyuls, high plateaus, the highest peaks, and in foothills. It is a knowledge that compels itself forward, selecting its spokespersons, initiating them into the ancient tradition, and possessing their bodies, speaking in dreams, all to carry forward a narrative that not only originates but is distinctly from the highlands.

Telluric currents and geomantic readings

Highland Asia's staggering heights and complex surfaces, traversed, divided, inhabited by its myriad and varied biotopes and beings, conceal a universe, continually made and unmade, of subterranean seas, stalactite and stalagmite cathedrals, river caverns, thrust and shear zones, and geothermal gradients, created out of the ever-buckling and fracturing lithosphere. These great mountain halls, explored for millennia by travellers seeking refuge, sages seeking quiet solace from surface worlds, such as the Vashishta Gufa beside the Ganges River in Uttarakhand, said to be where the great Sage Vashishta, the manas putra of Lord Brahma, hid to pray for pen-ance, are not lifeless vacuums. Rather, they reverberate with Earth energies that infuse surface

valleys with vitality and fertility from below, nourishing the biodiversity hotspots known for both immense variety and abundance. For many highlanders, these subterranean telluric powers, akin to the cosmic powers from above, are the presence and provenance of Earth gods; great spirits known as *terhuomia* in Tenyidie Naga (Joshi 2012), *sildo naldo* in Gurung (Pettigrew et al. 2009), *yul lha* in Dzongkha (Pommaret 2004), and *bra vinyam* in Jru' (Sprenger 2018). These ancient currents are the lords of the Earth, and across much of Highland Asia, they are measured in all kinds of ways and are some of the time interpreted through geomantic techniques. Whether a few pebbles in the palm of a hand or pyramidal peaks along a glacial gully, random arrangements in the landscape are anything but random and indeed form a script that can be read.

Geomancy renders the intentions of the landscape certainly legible but also presupposes some level of mutual understanding. Have there not been pledges between these Earth beings and original settlers? Was safe passage not negotiated, perhaps in a dream, and the convocation memorialised in the lighting of some mythic hearth? During the full calendar year of ritual performances, the lifegiving privileges enjoyed by the descendants of original settlers pass on to all living settlers. And through patrilineal primogeniture, the contractual arrangements with invisibles are continually revisualised, grafted into the genealogical knowledge and iconography of village clans, and dramatised in mythical storytelling; narratives that reach deep into the imagination, forming iconic and indexical dreamscapes and like the telluric texts of the landscape, form complex textures of premonitory knowledge intended for reading and heeding (Heneise 2019; see also Gaenszle this volume).

Ritual re-enactments are reciprocal communication events, where spirit labour is expended, and nourishing vitality is released into the human-tilled soils, guaranteeing good and plentiful harvests. Good and plentiful game for the hunt are also provided, and monoliths erected at the edges of fields, in vegetable gardens, or any number of places near settlements attest to this generative double labour of humans and nonhumans (Toffin 2019).

As many Highland Asian communities have now shifted to cash cropping, these ritual ties have also transformed, attesting again to the kind of pragmatism that can often govern decisions, the efficacy of customs, materials, and practices being prioritised over such notions of 'tradition for the sake of tradition', 'art for the sake of art', etc. (see Sprenger 2006b; 2016; and this volume). One must always remember that the symbolic repertoire of ritual acts and devotion, while often assumed to be the preserve of 'visible' sacred and public domains, are also always encoded in the quotidian practices that characterise that other great institution, namely the domestic sphere. Here, arduous work, boredom, childrearing, and food preparation all but conceal the fundamental work of constructing a cosmovision (cf. Rappenglück 2009). Around hearth energies that cook, light, heat, and frame the elaborate preparations of ancient recipes, direct the retelling of stories, dream narratives, folktales, and the intentions of the spirits, the structure and origin of spatiotemporal knowledge is retransmitted, re-encoded.

Over time, one sees both great and subtle shifts, remixes, and translations, changing routines and new appetites around this 'living' cosmology (Rist, San Martin, and Tapia 1999). Within ritual itself is also its very renewal, bringing ever-forward important pledges, assessing old boundaries, and questioning encroachments. Whatever fragmentation co-extensive social landscapes today experience, they are not the result of a failure or silencing of these narratives and currents, and the lifegiving sustenance they carry. Rather, fragmentation is the result of greed for power, hostility, and of violent upheaval. Violence forces new configurations and conceptualisations of the land and territory and a different symbolic system, one in which the pledges are no longer to local forest and mountain deities but to strange and foreign powers. Do the land gods or spirits of the land cease, therefore, to engage with their human counterparts? Do they quietly retreat

as forests retreat, state development projects force their way in, and human settlements expand, shift, or disappear? Or do they, in fact, exact revenge?

Consider the relatively recent, though quite critical, attention placed on Highland Asian biological and ecological systems and indeed their increasing volatility. Disproportionately impacted by global warming, the visible shrinkage of glaciers in the Hindu-Kush and Himalayan cryospheres, in particular, while affecting many millions of highlanders, is especially worrisome to lowland planners. The great river systems and basins these glacial melts feed into – the Ganges, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers – are vital life sources for well over a billion souls, many living in Asia's great metropoles. Scientists across disciplines document with increasing alarm the stresses to water tables associated with changing highland weather patterns; planners, particularly in India and China, rush to 'climate proof' their economic growth and political largesse in the region through powerful devices that drain, divert, enclose, and flood, in efforts to harness for themselves the power of these integrated Earth systems.

While China plans to divert the Yarlung Tsangpo River – Tibet's longest – towards the far Northwestern Taklamakan desert in Xingjiang, it rehearses this ambition in Yunnan, already home to China's longest railway tunnel, among other colossal projects (see also Rippa, Murton, and Rest 2020). Engineers indeed press ahead with a 'smaller' vision for Yunnan water diversion, intent on draining lakes and rivers in the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau to feed central drought-prone areas (Persio 2017). Here, the groundwater tables and telluric currents mingling with cryogenic and hydrological environments in subsurface Highland Asia are sometimes met by giant tunnelling machines, the Trumpian overlords of Asia's vast underworld; giving and taking away soil and water through redistribution and management and reconfiguring the biosphere from below.

At the same time that we become aware of Tibet-Xingjian tunnelling, residents of Arunachal Pradesh notice a disturbing change in the colour and viscosity of the generally crystalline Siang River – the main feeder linking the Yarlung Tsangpo and Brahmaputra rivers – and a lifeline to residents of the state. The river effectively turns black, into what appears as a vast undercurrent of slag – a waste matter leftover from drilling stone – and is no longer fit for human consumption, the pollution causing catastrophic loss of marine flora and fauna. Activists understandably link the blackened river with the perceived developmental belligerence upstream (Saikia 2017). Whether or not tunnelling beneath Tibet and the slag in Arunachal's Siang are connected, they point to deep and unsettling countercurrents that place entire biospheres and hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of people at risk and shatter any doubts as to the fragility of once believed inexhaustible Himalayan providence.

Political attention, regrettably, has scarcely been attuned to the great environmental crises unfolding in and beneath much of Highland Asia. Tensions, for example, between Beijing and Delhi are said to be at their highest in nearly half a century. But it is not because of tunnelling or downstream slag in a major river. In 2015, China and Pakistan began development of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a link in China's broader BRI, the final stretch in connecting the mainland Xinjiang corridor with the Arabian sea. While much of this new leg traverses Pakistan, it also bulldozes through long, politically sensitive (and violently contested) terrains, most notably Pakistan-administered Kashmir, to which India has long laid claim. But the widely reported high-altitude fisticuffs between Chinese and Indian soldiers along steep precipices of the Line of Actual Control, leading sometimes to many deaths, while a reminder of old tensions between nuclear states, also reminds us of the decidedly statist, macroframing of great power politics (see Plachta and Murton, this handbook). These blunt instruments of analysis used by Islamabad, Beijing, and Delhi-based elites, as they manage imaginaries of an unwieldy 2,400 kilometres of mountains, seem to go to great lengths to obscure the more serious Earth systems problems (Davis et al. 2021).

Largescale infrastructure projects, intensified agriculture, extractive industries, and militarisation have all strained the land. And dramatic fluctuations in local and regional climate patterns have led to an acceleration of already devastating glacial melting, severe climate conditions for local communities contributing to flash floods and landslides, destabilising local and interstate market supply chains, as well as precious supply routes for the security apparatus set up to manage geopolitical tensions. However, the ways the mountain terrains regularly frustrate strategists, planners, military, and civilians, keeping the geopolitical dynamics of highland border areas very much suspended in a kind of insurmountable contingency, is interpreted by some as the conscious acts by much more ancient powers. Is this the work of the land gods and Earth spirits? Are the original owners or higher deities of the animated landscape exacting revenge on intruders?

When we speak of geomancy, we consider the broader set of always present arrangements, interactions, relations, and attachments that bridge visible and invisible worlds and flows of power already framing political and social alignments and allegiances before their human, or indeed material, elaborations take form in the various systems and symbolic repertoires that shape and delimit social and political behaviour. Following Marshall Sahlins' lead in seeing 'the original political society' (2017), this geomancy, or Earth divination, entails a reading of enmeshed ecologies of communication and exchange and a continual evaluation of the symbols and their interpretational indices. This allows the exchange to occur because it includes a gradient of mediational affordances, with and without specialists. For millennia and across Highland Asia, the myriad handprints and footprints left by sages attest to this deep script and the long narrative of mutual human and nonhuman exchange.

In the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in Northeast Yunnan Province of China, Khawa Karpo rises and pierces the sky. Khawa Karpo is the tallest of the Meili Snow Mountains, which is part of the Hengduan Mountains (see Dan Smyer Yü, this handbook). It is one of the eight *neri*, or 'abode mountains', the most sacred mountains in Tibetan Buddhism. Akin to most naming practices in the Tibetosphere, Khawa Karpo refers both to the deity himself and the mountain where he resides. Originally, Khawa Karpo was a fierce *nyen*, or mountain demon, until the day he was subdued and converted into a protector of the Buddhist Dharma by Padmasambhava in the eighth century. Such stories of conversion are integral to the individual biographies of 'abode mountains'.

Like other 'abode mountains', Khawa Karpo is a spiritual manifestation of a deity who performs a distinctive role as an agent of history, governor of fortune, resident protector of an inclusive cosmic polity that hierarchically encompasses human lives, and part of the larger sacred landscape and language of Tibetan Buddhism. Scaling 'abode mountains' amounts to sacrilege of the gravest kind, an offence that would cause its owning and ruling deity to abandon his mountain and thus impact those human communities that reside on its lap, arms, and feet and whose collective health and fortune are contingent on a reciprocal relationship with such an 'abode mountain'. When, for instance, news reached Tibetan villagers that an international team of 17 mountaineers were assaulting the peak of Khawa Karpo in 1991, they immediately gathered to pray. They were also angry and protested their god's apparent submission to the climbers by yelling and obscene gesturing, all the while insisting Khawa Karpo explain his submission. They were too early in their judgement, perhaps too weak in their faith, however. As the climbers began their final assault, they were buried by an avalanche. None survived. Supplicants then asked Khawa Karpo for forgiveness for their insulting behaviour and thanked him for ending the assault. Today, state laws ban mountaineering (although not trekking) on Khawa Karpo, and such laws now exist for several 'abode mountains' across the Tibetosphere (Yeh and Coggins 2014; Litzinger 2004).

But if no longer threatened by fastidious and adrenaline-high mountaineers, Khawa Karpo, other 'abode mountains', as well as peaks inhabited by lesser local deities (*yul lha*) continue to be affronted and assaulted by other anthropogenic forces, particularly forceful among which are tourism, infrastructure development, capitalism and, relatedly, climate change. Take the Mingyong Glacier, which descends from the east face of Khawa Karpo and down into the Mekong River Valley. Descending from the summit, the glacier is deemed sacred, and two temples are constructed to propitiate and venerate it. In recent years, the Mingyong Glacier has been on the retreat. Rapidly so, to the extent that black rocks previously snow-covered have begun to appear, as did the 17 once snow-covered bodies of the mountaineers. For Tibetans, the retreating glacier is further evidence of Khawa Karpo's anger, or worse, abandonment, and in ways that threaten their existence, entwined, as it is, with the 'abode mountain'. But not just the Mingyong Glacier is retreating. Thousands of glaciers are in what can only be termed the 'big melt' (Larmer 2010). And not just to Tibetans does this pose an existential threat. It does so to many communities living in the vast plains below. These frozen glaciers, after all, are the sources of many of the world's largest rivers whose flows and sediments support well over one billion people directly in agriculture, drinking water, hydropower, and all kinds of livelihoods, and many more indirectly.

Khawa Karpo is part of the world's 'third pole', a term that traces back to a book on Himalayan mountaineering edited by Dyhrenfurh under the title *Zum Dritten Pol* in 1952. It is called thus because this region is home to the vast Hindu-Kush-Himalaya ice sheet that contains the largest amount of snow and ice after the Arctic and Antarctic. The current glacial melt, unprecedented with over a quarter of it having disappeared since 1970, threatens, besides religious havoc, death and injury for highland populations through glacial lake outbursts and landslides caused by destabilised rock. But more than that: it threatens the sustainability of large life worlds in places much further afield. Writes Kreutzmann (2020: 249) for the Karakoram mountains, which are also part of the third pole,

> Since the mountains of High Asia have been rediscovered as a 'visible indicator' in the climate change debate, the 'third pole' discussions have devoted scrutiny to the unique interactions among the atmosphere, cryosphere, hydrosphere and biosphere with huge impact on its glacial environments.
>
> *Kreutzmann (2020: 249)*

Can the great 'deity citadels' (Allison 2019) that are the backbone of this third pole act as a bridge between different worlds? Where does a world deeply worried by human activity and planetary changes meet with a world that sees itself as subordinate beings in a great cosmos of persons, some human, in which one must both respect and respond to the great deities that govern the landscape? In parts of Highland Asia, this is not such an abstract encounter. Indeed, this 'bridge' may be found in something as concrete as road construction or the building of other infrastructures in Bhutan. Here, these depend on the special abdication of otherwise claimed land by deities before it may be used, traversed, tunnelled, or otherwise shaped for human use. By contrast, large infrastructure projects such as the extensive tunnelling, damming, and paving by road and rail works, remain illegitimate if not negotiated a priori, and subject to, if the size and grandeur of the Himalayan peaks are commensurate to their power, the wrath of some of Earth's great and powerful beings.

Anthropocene discourse, admittedly, draws both on the idea of ecological sanctuary and indeed on ideas of the 'sacred' in coalition building, in policy action networks, and in identifying specific places to direct research energies and resources (Jenkins 2020a). Indeed, Willis Jenkins

identifies in the use of the phrase 'the sacred' by, in this case, conservationists ('The Sacred Sites Initiative', International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources [IUCN]), the intentional signalling of this notion of the bridge. Lands set apart in some special way, by different peoples and potentially for different reasons, can be drawn into comparison, and this draws distinct communities facing similar global threats towards one another and potentially towards collective response (Jenkins 2020: 4).

Situating research in such places, in surface and subterranean domains regarded as sacred, in mountain abodes of great deities, in marketplaces of border towns and outposts, among travellers and bards sharing news of their travels, in Buddhist monasteries, and in hilltop churches, all offer rare vantage points in exploring the ways in which cultural imagination interacts and makes sense of change, even the kinds of worrisome change associated with global warming, cryogenic melting, and dropping water tables (Jenkins 2020: 4). This volume expresses as much surprise as it does confidence, by both strangeness and familiarity, which across such a vast world region as Highland Asia, is at every encounter and every turn.

And as we bring this introduction to a close, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge our strong formative connection to an important place around the bend, where indeed we both cut our teeth as anthropologists, namely the Naga Hills in the Indo-Burma borderlands. And while space does not allow for us to elaborate on our respective ethnographic areas, we acknowledge a frankly unpayable debt to so many that shared with us their deepest thoughts, experiences, challenges, dreams, and ambitions, and not least helped us navigate the many borders, geopolitical tensions, political conflicts, and stringent visa regimes that invariably framed our everyday fieldwork experience. Admittedly, such challenges also afforded us the opportunity to become more sensitive to realities that many experience daily. Indeed much of what is expressed in this introduction can be traced to conversations, ideas, realisations, loud and soft moments we had while sitting with friends and family around kitchen hearths in our respective Naga home communities, in Phek, Tuensang, and Kohima. While back then we worked in separate regions, on quite different research topics, and indeed met on only two occasions, we find now that we had something of a shared or common experience, one that convicted us then and certainly finds its way reflected in this introduction. More importantly, however, it seems to resonate much with the experiences of many of the scholars contributing to this handbook – thinking in, from, and with the perspective of the highlands is a very different kind of thinking.

This *Handbook*

This volume aspires to be an accessible handbook offering a critical overview of the ethnographic and anthropological work done in Highland Asia over the past half a century. Through chapters written by scholars who have intimate knowledge through fieldwork, this handbook assesses the history of research, identifies ethnographic trends, and evaluates the range of analytical themes that developed in particular settings of Highland Asia. By providing a systematic overview of regionally based ethnographic research, this handbook aims to provide readers with a comprehensive introduction to Highland Asia that reveals both regional commonalities and diversities, generalities and specificities, and a broad orientation to key themes in the region.

Khawa Karpo, the great sentient mountain of Tibet discussed above, with its intertwining and mutually embodying relation with humans and other-than-human beings, stands perhaps as the most apt metaphor for the layered social sphere that is Highland Asia, and which we further explore in the following 31 chapters, spanning diverse countries, across the giant massifs of the Pamirs, the Himalayas, and Southeast Asia. While guided by Jean Michaud (2010) in his suggested use of the Pamirs, Himalaya, and Southeast Asian Massifs in mapping Zomia (or indeed

'Zomia+'), we have further grouped the chapters into six areas or subregions for ease of reading. And while we move in this direction with great care and consultation, recognising that at a certain level, comparative analysis makes sense across particular areas, more so than perhaps others, these should not entail boundaries or borders, conceptually or otherwise.

This handbook is divided into six sections, namely the Sino-Tibetan Mountains, the Central Asian Mountains and the Western Himalaya, the Central Himalaya, the Eastern Himalaya, the Bengal-Indo-Burma highlands, and the Southeast Asian Massif. Each section starts with a map of the designated region. These maps, of which political boundaries have been removed, are indicative and illustrative of the region that is being discussed. We are fully aware of the imperfect and often arbitrary nature of mapmaking, that indeed, we may pull apart what is the same, and bring together what is different. However, we believe that these maps will help us to re-imagine the spatialisation of space and of scholarship towards seeing Highland Asia as a world region and thinking of this space beyond conventional political boundaries. Within each section map, the territorial map and ethnographic scope of each chapter are broadly delineated as well, again for indicative purposes.

Our survey of Highland Asia as a world region begins in the Sino-Tibetan Mountains and its societies, with entries by Dan Smyer Yü on the Hengduan Mountains or 'Middle Highlands' of China that connect the outer edges of Southeast Asia and Mongolia, followed by Gillian Tan on Kham and Sichuan, Eveline Washul and Yumjyi on Amdo, and finally Nadine Plachta and Galen Murton exploring U-Tsang, Ngari, and the Northern Changtang grasslands.

The following group, which we are calling Central Asian Highlands and Western Himalaya begins with a chapter by Ildiko Beller-Hann, exploring China's extreme northwestern district of Xinjiang. This is followed by an entry by Nienke van der Heide, whose research in Kyrgyzstan shares the Tian Shan mountain range, which indeed extends well into the heart of Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan's Southeastern Pamirs then link us with the great Pamir-Hindu-Kush-Karakoram-Western-Himalaya convergence. Here, Hermann Kreutzmann explores the Pamirs across Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, while Radhika Gupta finishes up this group with her chapter on Gilgit-Baltistan and Ladakh.

In the Central Himalayas, we open with Subhadra Mitra Channa in the Indian Himalaya and the Indo-Tibet borderland, followed by Phurwa Gurung and Kenneth Bauer's exploration of Dolpo in the Nepal-Tibet borderland, before moving nearer the capital of Nepal with Mukta Tamang's chapter on the Nepal Central Highlands. Pasang Sherpa then takes us back to the Nepal-Tibet border, this time to the Khumbu valley in Northeastern Nepal. The Eastern Himalaya group has chapters by Martin Gaenszle, who explores Eastern Nepal and the Singalila borderland; Tanka Subba, who looks at Sikkim and Darjeeling, Yedzin Wangmo Tobgay, who explores Bhutan; and Zilpha A. Modi, who guides us through Arunachal Pradesh.

We then arrive in what we have dubbed here the Bengal-Indo-Burma highlands. We start with Ellen Bal and Nasrin Siraj on the Chittagong Hill Tracts, followed by a contribution on the Mizo-Kuki-Chin by David Vumlallian Zou. Harihar Bhattacharyya follows with an exploration of the Tripura hill ranges. Next, we enter Meghalaya in India with a chapter by Erik de Maaker, followed by a co-authored chapter by Dharamsing Teron and Manas Bordoloi on the Tiwa and Karbi of Karbi Anglong, before proceeding with a chapter on the transborder Naga areas by Kanato Chophy. We then round out this group with a co-authored chapter on Kachinland by Mandy Sadan and Ja Htoi Pan Maran.

We then move to the Southeast Asian Massif group, which begins with an entry by Magnus Fiskesjö, who writes on the Wa and the Southeast Asia-China borderlands. We then have Mikael Gravers introduce us to the Karen of the Burma/Myanmar-Thailand borderland, Guido Sprenger introduce us to the Rmeet and Jru' in highland Laos, and Nathan Badenoch explores

the uplands of northern Thailand. Ian Baird then follows with a chapter on Northeastern Cambodia and Gabor Vargyas with a chapter on the Bru of Central Vietnam and Laos. Travelling north, we then proceed with a co-authored contribution by Timothy Oakes and Zuo Zhenting on Guizhou and the Southwest China uplands and conclude the group (and this handbook) with a chapter by Jean Michaud, one in which he explores the Vietnam-China borderlands.

Notes

1 We thank Jean Michaud, Willem van Schendel, Hermann Kreutzmann, Tanka B. Subba, and Nathan Badenoch for their critical comments on this introduction, and Johan Eilertsen Arntzen for his diligent work developing the maps. We also thank UiT The Arctic University of Norway for contributing financially to this handbook project, and Jean Michaud for the beautiful cover image. Finally, we thank the team at Routledge, especially Dorothea and Alexandra for their guidance and accompaniment throughout.

2 Multilingualism arises from social contact, while social relationships and ethnic identities are influenced by these language use practices. Multilingualism is often characterised by hierarchies of economic or political power. In Highland Asia, however, these structures are determined more by local dynamics such as shared kinship, ritual, and forest-based livelihoods, rather than opposition to a lowland model of social life, as in the case of the Tibeto-Burman speaking Karen and Austroasiatic Lawa (Badenoch, this handbook).

3 This local preoccupation with indigeneity persists rather irrespective of nation-states rejecting, for varied reasons, the applicability of indigeneity on their soil such as is the case for India, China, and Pakistan, or legally accepting it, as in Cambodia (Baird, this handbook).

4 Indigenous scholars, moreover, may point out how their community and culture has been misunderstood and misrepresented by nonlocal scholars. Several chapters in this handbook, such as the ones by Yedzin Tobgay, Zilpha Modi, Washul and Yumjyi, and Pasang Sherpa, on Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Amdo in Tibet, and the Sherpa region in Nepal, respectively, show how the current generation of indigenous scholars must grapple with the ways the communities they belong to, and write about, have been incorporated and represented in particularistic intellectual traditions. Indeed, these authors join a growing chorus of recent critical scholarship challenging the 'researcher-researched' relationship, and indeed the whole complex of Euro-Western epistemological dominance so entrenched in academia. Inspired by thinkers such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and particularly her work, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), as well as collaborative projects such as *Indigenous Pathways into Social Research: Voices of a New Generation*, edited by Donna Mertens, Fiona Cram, and Bagele Chilisa (2013), there is a growing awareness (and this handbook, while imperfect, strives towards this) of the need to recognize the plurality of knowledge, as a corrective lens, and as a new anchoring for critical scholarship.

5 On some of the complexities regarding historical lowlanders now living in the highlands, and highlanders having moved downhill, see the chapter in this handbook by Bal and Siraj that engages 'de facto highlanders' in the Bengal borderland, as well as the chapter by Bellér-Hann about the 'conceptual highlanders' of Xinjiang.

6 For many highland communities, some have argued, literacy was conceived of as uncomfortable, disruptive, and worthy of distrust as they associated it with state structures that sought to oppress them. In any case, literacy was of little consequence to the lives they intended to live. Highlanders' distrust was to the extent that, according to James Scott (2009), the historical absence of literacy among them could have resulted from its tactical rejection, thus making orality a preference rather than a deficiency. This would suggest that the highlanders' outlook on literacy differs significantly from those of the majority of lowlanders who cherish longstanding literary traditions. On the relationship between scripts and prophecy, which is also variously reported across the region, see Longkumer (2016), and David Zou, this handbook.

7 Just to be absolutely sure, our conceptualisation of Highland Asia here is not meant to enclose or essentialise its geographical stretch. It remains inherently arbitrary to pinpoint exactly where lowlands become highlands or by what exact criteria a lowlander becomes a highlander and vice-versa, and therefore where Highland Asia starts and ends. There also remain other highlands in Asia, such as in Taiwan, Malaysia, and the Philippines, but which are not contiguous with the highlands that are our focus here, but in relation to which revealing connections, comparisons, and contrasts could be drawn.

8 Here, and in the paragraphs that follow, we draw inspiration from the rich field of critical scholarship on maps, mapmaking, cartography, and the social construction of political spaces, including works by Bob Abrams (2005), Benedict Anderson (1983), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), Jeremy Crampton (2001; Crampton and Krygier 2006), John B. Harley (1989; 1990; 1991), John Pickles (1991; 2004), and Denis Wood (1992).

9 An important strand in Fürer-Haimendorf's work concerned Trans-Himalayan trade and connections. However, in his preface to another edited volume, long since of out of print, titled *Asian Highland Societies in Anthropological Perspective* (1981), he also emphasised the ability of mountains to 'act as barriers preserving cultures which without such physical protection might have been submerged by civilizations of very different character'. Focusing on the Himalaya, he explained: 'Thus neither the Hindu renaissance of post-Buddhist India nor the waves of Islamic conquests sweeping through Asia were able to dislodge the Buddhist Centres which had been established in remote regions of the Central Himayalas' (1981: ix).

10 As much as the Himalaya, as a geophysical entity, remains a project in motion, the term 'the roof of the world' also shifted over time. It was first coined in the context of the Pamirs by the British explorer John Wood, who, writing in 1838, described *Bam-I-Duniah* (roof of the world) as a local Wakhi expression (Wood 1840: 535). Over time, however, the phrase 'the roof of the world' became used somewhat indiscriminately, and as a metaphoric description of the mountainous interior of Asia, variously in reference to the Pamirs, the Himalayas, Tibet, Tian-Shan, and the Altai Mountains.

11 We borrow the term 'earth being' from Marisol de la Cadena (2015), who uses it to describe the Andean mountain Ausangate, and other mountains as well as rivers, lagoons, and rocks, to emphasise the histories and agency of other-than-human beings who participate in the lives of those who live around them. De la Cadena argues that peoples across the Andes engage with mountains, rivers, and rocks as agential *beings*, which ultimately evidences a relational ontology. We suggest that this approach could be fruitfully applied to Highland Asia, and should be part of a larger comparative exercise between Highland Asia and other mountainous regions across the globe; an exercise that remains hitherto scarcely undertaken.

12 Not all of these debates regarding the origins and founding dispersal of languages have been definitely settled. The origins of proto-Austroasiatic in particular remains debated between origins in the Eastern Himalaya, the Middle-Mekong, as well as the hypotheses that it first originated in Yunnan or that is might have a more coastal origin (see Jenny and Sidwell 2015).

13 While the linguistic diversity across Highland Asia is astounding and largely correlates with biodiversity, latitude, and topography, this diversity is currently threatened by real processes of language endangerment and disappearance. This endangerment is often explicitly political, due to various forms of oppression, stigmatization, marginalization, and exclusion indigenous and minoritised languages experience at the hands of dominant communities and the nexus of state-capital that generally promote homogeneity and assimilation over the value of cultural and linguistic diversity (see Roche 2020; Roche and Suzuki 2018).

14 On the active role Afghan merchants played (both past and present) at the crossroads of major overland trading routes, cutting the boundaries between South Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe, see Marsden's *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants Across Modern Frontier* (2016).

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