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From loom to machine: Tibetan aprons and the configuration of place

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Abstract. In this paper I examine how objects become connected to place in complex and contradictory ways. Over the past ten to fifteen years, rapid transformations in Chinese manufacturing and transportation networks have significantly altered the production, marketing, and consumption of commodities made in the Tibet Autonomous Region and traded in Kalimpong, India, and Kathmandu, Nepal. In an attempt to connect the ethnographic study of material culture with more macrolevel processes of geoeconomic change, I begin the piece with an examination of the changing production, materials, and styles of a very specific commodity, the Tibetan women's apron. I then explore traders' narratives about the values of handmade, machine-made, wool, and synthetic commodities, arguing that we ought to look beyond dichotomies of 'old' versus 'new' or 'authentic' versus 'inauthentic' objects to show in detail how the attachment of commodities to representations of *place* figures importantly in the contemporary study both of globalization and uneven development. Finally, I suggest that Karl Marx's notion of dead labor is useful in analyzing the recent move towards the revitalization of Tibetan wool for both the domestic Chinese industry and the global tourist industry.

Keywords: commodity chains, material culture, narratives of place, uneven development, Tibet, traders

"The world of commodities would have no reality without moorings."

Henri Lefebvre (1991 [1974], page 403)

1 The world of commodities

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

"English woolens, Japanese velvet, Chinese silk, Nepalese cottons, and Indian brocade ... filled the shelves. Coral was imported from Italy, turquoise from Iran, and brick tea from Shanghai ... Mongolians and Tajiks brought silk to Lhasa, Bhutanese brought rice to barter for silk, Golok nomads brought wool, Amdowas brought Chinese silver coins and gold dust, and Khampas brought brick tea to trade for textiles" (2004, pages 22 and 69–70).⁽¹⁾

At first glance, the myriad of commodities to be found in the Tibetan marketplace can act as a material reflection of the social and economic networks that link Lhasa with other parts of the world. Yet, the journeys of goods involve increasingly far-flung and complex production and distribution channels. Contemporary Tibetan brocade jackets sold in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China may be made of silk from Varanasi, synthetic

⁽¹⁾ Golok, Amdo, and Kham are regions in eastern Tibet that are currently incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan.

wool from Xinjiang, and buttons from Kathmandu; they might be assembled and tailored in Lhasa then sold in Germany. The fact that networks are relatively opaque evokes Karl Marx's injunction, in his writings on the commodity, to peer beneath the surface sheen of the 'mysterious' finished product at the web of social relations involved in its production, distribution, and marketing (1990 [1867]). But what does it mean for *something* to come from *somewhere*? How might we investigate the social and economic processes that serve to link places with things? Who has the authority to create and sell accounts of the authenticity of objects that are at the same time geographic accounts of place? In this paper I argue that when the economic geography of a trading landscape is transformed so are peoples' lived experiences of production, distribution, and consumption; yet, at the same time, changes in the means of production redistribute place-based narratives of commodities in uneven and sometimes contradictory ways. I focus on traders' and merchants' experiences with their goods to demonstrate how personal narratives of the properties, spatial origins, and trajectories of commodities can serve as examples of how certain kinds of geographies are established or fixed in place of others.⁽²⁾ This analysis is conducted in two parts. In sections 2, 3, and 4 I examine the production, marketing, and consumption of one specific commodity, the *pang gdan*, an apron traditionally woven and worn by women in Tibetan areas of the Himalayas—this includes the TAR, Amdo, and Kham and other regions of Nepal and northern India. In sections 5 onwards I outline traders' descriptions of the contemporary decline of the quality of commodities, demonstrating that certain values (such as 'purity' and 'energy') are attached to goods in very specific times and locales and therefore acquire particular meanings in these contexts. This work is ultimately intended to contribute to studies of the changing relationship between commodities and geographies, and to question who has the authority to produce geographic narratives as part of the circulation of material goods.

2 The social life of things, commodity chains, and practices of everyday life

Scholars remain divided over how to weigh the relative importance of production, exchange, and consumption in the processes of trade and capitalist accumulation. In two different but related trajectories of work that serve as background to this paper the interconnections between these processes are investigated: (a) models used to examine the 'social life' or 'biography' of commodities in order to trace their trajectory through varying phases of production, exchange, *and* consumption; and (b) models of commodity chains used to trace production and consumption processes across borders. In anthropological studies of the 'lives' of objects (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986; Myers, 2001; Thomas, 1991) it has been demonstrated that social relationships are necessarily involved in the acquisition, exchange, distribution, and marketing of goods; and in research on food commodity chains—such as Ian Cook et al's work on political economy and papayas (2004), Sidney Mintz's study of the cultural

⁽²⁾A note on methodology and transliteration: this research was based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Lhasa, Tibet, Kathmandu, Nepal, and Kalimpong, India, between 2005 and 2007. Approximately 100 interviews were conducted with two generations of traders, those in their seventies and eighties who used to trade before the Sino-Indian War and border closures of 1962, and those in their twenties, thirties, and forties, nearly all of whom had parents or grandparents who were involved in the pre-1962 trade. All names and identifying markers of interviewees have been changed. Tibetan, Chinese, Nepali, and English were the main languages used in this project. Newari, Hindi, and Marwari terms were also used but are not quoted in this text. For Chinese words I have used the standardized pinyin system for terms such as *hukou* (household registration system) but use English phoneticizations without italics for more commonly used words such as 'Beijing'. Similarly, for Tibetan I have used the Wylie transliteration model for words such as *kha btags* (ceremonial scarves) but use English phoneticizations without italics for words such as the 'Barkor' (the central marketplace and pilgrimage circuit in Lhasa) that are commonly used. Interviews in Tibet were conducted in Tibetan unless otherwise indicated. Interviews in India and Nepal were conducted in English, unless otherwise indicated.

history of sugar in the Caribbean (1985), or Theodore Bestor's work on the global sushi market (2001)—has been effectively shown how active participants in these chains are both locally and globally situated (see also Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1994; Haugerud et al, 2000; Humphrey and Hugh-Jones, 1992). However, tracing an object's journey—along with its multiple social connections—from its moment of production to its moment of consumption remains a lofty but unrealizable goal. I focus here, instead, on the importance of traders as intermediaries or mediators in influencing the travels of commodities and controlling the knowledge of commodities' origins and trajectories, in an effort to explore the political economy of people, commodities, and places more fully.

The commodity itself, as Marx has shown, has no inherent meaning in and of itself; rather, the use and exchange of objects have been historically shaped so that the same object might have radically different meanings in different contexts. Although there have been critiques of the Marxian approach to the commodity (eg, Miller, 1995), I find this angle critical in order to pay specific attention to how values and meanings attributed to commodities are connected to places and ideas of place. For instance certain sheep wool products, no matter what their true origins might be, are seen as tied to a specific kind of Tibetan landscape, one that is 'pure' and detached from the current reality of Chinese ownership and development. If we keep in mind the Marxian claim that the commodity form obscures original social relations and production (and, accordingly, geographical origins), diverse kinds of social and geographical connections are reinserted into commodities in complex ways and are always caught up in political struggles.

Where, then, might it be appropriate to begin an inquiry into the tangled linkages between places, people, and things? Lefebvre and others have suggested that social structures and spatial meanings can be extrapolated from detailed analyses of everyday practices. The examination of seemingly trivial activities such as walking along city streets (Michel de Certeau) or the routine use of material goods in the home (Pierre Bourdieu) reveals the varied uses and construction of various kinds of social places—public and private, class, gendered, etc—as well as social struggles over the control of territory or the unequal distribution of resources. Along with technological progress and the mass manufacturing of consumer goods comes a simultaneous increase in the physical and emotional distance between people and the production of things (Marx, 1990 [1867]; Simmel, 1990 [1907]). One starting point, perhaps, is to recall Lefebvre's notes on the commodity in *The Production of Space*:

"As for the commodity in general, it is obvious that kilograms of sugar, sacks of coffee beans and metres of fabric cannot do duty as the material underpinning of its existence. The stores and warehouses where these things are kept, where they wait, the ships, trains and trucks that transport them—and hence the routes used—have also to be taken into account. Furthermore, having considered all these objects individually, one still has not properly apprehended the material underpinning of the world of commodities. Nor do such notions as 'channel', derived from information theory, or 'repertoire', help us define such an ensemble of objects. The same goes for the idea of 'flows' ... The world of commodities would have no 'reality' without such moorings or points of insertion, or without their existing as an ensemble. The same may be said of banks and banking-networks vis-à-vis the capital market and money transfers, and hence vis-à-vis the comparison and balancing of profits and the distribution of surplus value" (1991 [1974], page 403).

A bag of barley flour brought across the borders of Tibet and Nepal is not disconnected from the people who transport it, nor from 'moorings' such as warehouses or the mules that carry it across the Himalayas. The idea, according to Lefebvre and Marx, is to consider not simply commodities in and of themselves but also the social networks that comprise and connect the production, exchange, and consumption of commodities; "commodities themselves cannot

go to market and perform exchanges in their own right. We must, therefore, have recourse to their guardians, who are the possessors of commodities" (Marx, 1990 [1867], page 178). And, yet, even the possessors of commodities do not always go to market by their own choice. "Things lie", wrote Lefebvre, "they lie in order to conceal their origin, namely social labour, they tend to set themselves up as absolutes. Products and the circuits they establish (in space) are fetishized and so become more 'real' than reality itself—that is, the productive activity itself, which they thus take over" (1991 [1974], page 81). The challenge is to show how the values and meanings inserted in objects by traders are related to larger economic and geographic processes. How can we look at the productive aspects of the journeys of commodities together with their 'moorings' in order to examine the long-term history of changes along Asian trade routes? How might studying the links between commodities and place increase our understanding of uneven development?

3 Paths of the pang gdan

One rather unassuming but characteristically 'Tibetan' object of material culture is the pang gdan. It is a striped apron worn by Tibetan and Sherpa women in many parts of the Himalayan region (in general, non-Tibetan and non-Sherpa women do not wear these aprons). For the purposes and scope of this paper I will not inquire into the folklore, regional styles, names of color schemes, or specific weaving techniques of the pang gdan in great detail.⁽³⁾ Briefly, however, the pang gdan is made of three or four alternating panels of colorful striped cloth and is often—though not always—worn over the chuba, the Tibetan dress, to indicate married status. In Tibet pang gdan have traditionally been woven by the women of the household on horizontal wooden looms. They are made of goat's hair (*shad ma*) woven into a kind of *snam bu* (a heavy woolen cloth), for which the yarn was carded, spun, and dyed with vegetable dyes such as madder and indigo. There were different kinds of aprons made from a variety of materials; generally, aristocratic women had more access to aprons made of softer and finer wool like *shad ma*. Bright chemical dyes were first introduced to Tibet in the early 1900s (Snellgrove and Richardson, 1968, page 235). In the 1950s these became extremely popular for aprons due to the increased availability of dyes from Europe and India, as well as the fact that the chemical coloring process proved to be at least three times quicker than the vegetable process (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1975, page 79). By the time Tibet was considered an official part of China in the 1950s, 70% of trade between Tibet and India had been effectively bought out by the Chinese state; the Sino-Indian War of 1962 resulted in the sealing-off of the border passes between China and India, and the Cultural Revolution halted much trade (Shakya, 1999, page 115). After the start of Chinese reforms in 1978, the growth of China and India as major economic powers led to renewed Sino-Indian trade negotiations. *Xibu da kaifa*, the 'Develop the West' campaign, was formally initiated in 2000, coinciding with plans for China's entry into the World Trade Organization, and spurred massive development and labor migration towards the rural western provinces of China, including Xinjiang and the TAR. It is against this backdrop that the contemporary pang gdan story unfolds.

Over the past twenty years or so, a noticeable difference has emerged between apron materials and styles worn by women in the burgeoning urban areas of Tibet and those worn by women living in areas further away from major towns. One elderly *snam bu* pang gdan trader from Lhoka noted that more and more urban women had begun to purchase synthetic pang gdan from retail stores, while those in rural areas continued to wear the homespun woolen ones. "No one", he remarked, "wears wool pang gdan in the city anymore". Today, Gonggar County in Lhokha (the southeastern prefecture of Tibet adjacent to Lhasa) remains one of the major seats of wool pang gdan weaving, even though synthetic materials are

⁽³⁾ For a comprehensive account of textile production and gender in Ladakh, where weaving techniques are similar to those in Tibet, see Monisha Ahmed's *Living Fabric* (2002).

increasingly used. Nomads in this region near Yamdrok Lake will still travel to local villages, selling bales of sheep wool to village apron weavers (generally women), who then use the wool to weave rolls of striped apron cloth (figures 1 and 2). Their family members (predominantly the male ones) travel to Lhasa during the winter and between the planting and harvesting seasons in order to sell large rolls of the woolen apron material as well as cloth featuring a tie-dyed pattern (*thig ma*) often used as decorative trimming on the bottoms of chubas.

Yet, as another woolen cloth trader from Lhoka puts it:

“People in Lhasa don’t buy *snam bu pang gdan* as much anymore. It is much easier and cheaper to get Chinese silk now to make aprons. Amdowas and Khampas will buy the *snam bu*, and even foreign and Chinese tourists, but not those from Lhasa. Lhasa people don’t know how to make things out of this material anymore.”

In statements made by other traders of woolen *pang gdan* cloth—who, because of their role as intermediaries, are in a good position to witness changes in both consumption and production—the introduction of this new ‘silk’ apron material was brought up time and time again. As recently as five years ago, a shinier, silkier, synthetic thread began to be brought to Lhasa in bulk from Fujian and Sichuan Provinces. Although synthetic threads for making *pang gdan* have been brought to Lhasa from places in India that have substantial Tibetan communities such as Mussoorie for decades, one *pang gdan* weaver said that in comparison with the new Chinese thread the Indian materials were just not as good. The aprons fell apart quickly and they were difficult to wash by hand. Most shopkeepers and retailers call the new synthetic apron thread ‘silk’ (*gru’u tsi*) in order to associate it with the higher-value material but it is in actuality a rayon mix. Unlike the thicker *shad ma*, it can be used to weave extremely narrow and precise stripes, and the finished product ends up looking much sleeker and shinier than the wool *pang gdan* from Lhoka.

Figure 1. Map showing Lhasa and Lhoka prefectures in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Figure 2. A *snam bu pang gdan* roll for sale behind the Jokhang, the main temple in Lhasa, 2006.

While the recent introduction of this new silky pang gdan thread may seem like a minor development, it both reflects and reinforces a number of crucial shifts concerning, on one level, the regional economy of Tibet and, on another level, the cultural meanings and value of material objects. Firstly, from a geographical standpoint, it represents Lhasa's dependence on the production of apron materials shifting from less developed areas in the TAR and cities in India with Tibetan populations to synthetic textile manufacturing centers in inland China. Despite the fact that Lhasa borders Lhoka, since 2002 faster and cheaper access to synthetic apron materials from much further away—cities in Sichuan or Fujian Provinces—has led to a proliferation of synthetic aprons manufactured in Lhasa, a sharp decrease in the price of aprons, a diversification in the levels of apron quality, and competing apron styles (such as those that incorporate silver and gold threads). In 2005, for instance, what one workshop owner considered the 'best-quality' handwoven aprons were sold at wholesale prices for approximately 75–80 RMB (US\$ 9–10). Medium-quality aprons were about 50 RMB (US\$6), and low-quality aprons were 25 RMB (US\$3). Poor-quality machine-made aprons were sold at retail prices for about 20 RMB (US\$2.50). Compare these prices with the best-quality handwoven aprons from 2002, which went for approximately 200 RMB (US\$24) on the retail market.

Although fewer and fewer snam bu pang gdan from Lhoka are sold to urban Lhasans, they are still occasionally purchased by nomads and pilgrims or by tourists, who traders

say use the cloth for decorative purposes (for example, as runners on dining-room tables). From a spatial perspective, then, the trading landscape has altered. While some trading links have expanded and strengthened, others have contracted and weakened. Whereas the apron-making workshops in Lhasa have developed strong connections with, and are now quite dependent on materials from, industrialized locales like Chengdu in Sichuan, the Lhoka weavers are losing their consumers in Lhasa and must rely on those from other nonurban areas or the occasional tourist.

The access to new apron materials is also related to the increase in Han (in particular, Sichuanese) migrant workers in Tibet during the early 2000s in the wake of such changes as the campaigns to develop the western regions of China, the easing of restrictions surrounding business licenses for outsiders to work in Tibet, as well as the relaxing of regulations related to the household registration system (*hukou*) (Hu, 2004). Migrant workers often maintain and reinforce strong obligatory connections (*guanxi*) with acquaintances and family members from their hometowns (*laoxiang*), many of whom have access to materials from manufacturers and factories in inland China. On the whole, Tibetans with adequate Chinese language skills and knowledge of the workings of these migrant business networks have gained access to synthetic thread distributors, whereas those who remain tied to older trading networks are finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the pace of information and new textile supplies from inland China. With the transformation of the economic landscape of Tibet and its incorporation into the Chinese state, Lhasa has shifted spatially from a regional center into a national margin, losing its “position in the Tibetan cultural imagination as a center of all things Tibetan” (Yeh, 2003, page 24). While this shift in cultural or geographical imagination may be true amongst Tibetans in the TAR, it is not quite the same for many living outside of China, which we will see some evidence of later on.

Not only do the new apron-making materials illuminate economic transformations on a regional level, through the various meanings ascribed to them, they also convey aesthetic and class differences. Prior to the start of the Tibetan New Year holiday, I accompanied some friends on a shopping expedition to purchase new aprons to match their brocade chubas. The brighter colored aprons were immediately pointed out to me as ‘*har drags sha*’ (too gaudy); instead they picked out aprons with thin stripes in subtle colors such as grey and dark blue. In the shops rows of shiny new aprons were displayed on the mannequins in the front windows. The older aprons made out of Indian synthetic thread were not on show for customers; on the contrary, they were used to wipe down glass countertops. One retailer kindly presented me with a couple of these aprons for the purpose of cutting them up and sewing them into change purses as gifts for my friends. The woolen snam bu aprons were to be found only in individual rolls or displayed in ‘antique’ shops for tourists. When asked what they thought distinguished their clothing styles from those of women outside of Lhasa, a few Lhasan women explained to me: “You can tell immediately if a woman is from the village or the city—only the villagers will wear the woolen pang gdan with bigger and brighter stripes.” One elderly man who used to be involved with the wool trade in India noted: “The pang gdan stripes in Lhasa have gotten much smaller and less bright. Only older, traditional people wear the colorful pang gdan with the big stripes.”

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

and their place-based meanings, can be further produced and reinforced by retailers in order to market them to more diverse audiences.

4 Handmade versus machine-made aprons

In central Lhasa a pang gdan workshop is set up inside a simple two-storey building, which is indistinguishable from any other grey building along the busy main road. The workshop is extremely clean but cramped and four horizontal wooden looms are set up facing each other in a square in each of the two rooms on the first floor. The twenty-odd weavers are mostly young women (with the exception of one man, the brunt of much teasing) in their late teens or early twenties; nearly all the workers hail from Lhokha. Migmar, the Tibetan owner of the workshop, reminisces about the brisk business he experienced when he first opened his workshop five years ago: his aprons were selling at reasonable rates and his profits increased once he changed his thread supplier from an Indian-based thread manufacturer to one of the Chinese 'silk' suppliers from Sichuan (figure 3).

In 2002 one of his business partners brought some sample aprons to a textile factory in Sichuan Province and showed the manufacturers how Tibetan aprons were woven. A year later, when the factory in Sichuan developed a machine that was designed to mass-produce pang gdan, the business partner left Migmar's workshop to open his own pang gdan retail shop and began selling the machine-made aprons that were manufactured in the Chengdu factory and shipped overland to Lhasa. Migmar remained at the handloom workshop and found himself hard-pressed to match his former partner's pace and much lower cost of production. At first, Migmar stated, his customers could distinguish between his own handmade pang gdan and his former partner's machine-made ones, which were beginning to appear in shops and vendor stalls in the main marketplace; but, after a year or so, the machine-made techniques improved so that it became extremely difficult to differentiate between the two upon first glance.

Figure 3. Weaving aprons with the new 'silk' thread on a handloom.

Although pang gdan are still woven on wooden handlooms in Lhasa in small workshops such as the one described above and in many village areas in Tibet, handmade aprons have become much more difficult to locate in retail shops around the city. Given that it takes one worker three days on average to weave one three-paneled apron on a wooden loom, it turns out to be much more profitable in that same time to transport hundreds of machine-made aprons from Sichuan to Lhasa to sell. The owners of the handloom workshops are finding that their handmade products simply cannot compete with the cheaper machine-made pang gdan from much farther away. This combination of improved pang-gdan-making technology and better access to economic networks trumps geographical distance, a classic example of how capital will overcome spatial barriers such as mountains or long distances, transforming some social infrastructures at the expense of others (Harvey, 1999, page 399). Globalization, often either touted as a force that brings the world closer together through new technologies or demonized as wreaking environmental and social havoc, is fraught with inequality and these contradictions of capitalist expansion take on acute spatial expressions, where some regions and people benefit and others do not (Katz, 2001; Smith, 1990 [1984]). The inequalities in the changing relationships of apron production—from the wool weavers in Lhokha to the handloom workshop with the new ‘silk’ thread, to the people who ship the machine-made aprons from Chengdu—reveal a reworking of the geographical imagination that is not coherent and does not accelerate in a linear way. It is uneven not only in the way that it creates ‘progress’ in some places and leaves others untouched but also in the sense that it redistributes place-based narratives in what are often contradictory ways. Let me explain this a bit further.

Both Han and Tibetan pang gdan merchants and consumers have stated that although it has become difficult to tell the difference between handmade and machine-made pang gdan at first glance the former are still of considerably higher quality since the threads are more tightly woven and the cloth is softer as a result. In a chuba retail shop in Lhasa one proprietor showed me the label on a machine-made pang gdan from inland China. But the label boasted a Tibetan brand name and a picture of a wooden loom, suggesting that the apron was, instead, handmade in the TAR. Because intermediaries such as marketers and merchants are often familiar with the geographies of both production and consumption—that is, they know both where the aprons are produced or procured and where the consumers reside—they configure and reconfigure spatial and cultural relationships among the object, its producers, and its consumers. This is done in order to sell their products and obtain a monopoly price: for instance, a pang gdan that is advertised as ‘handwoven in Tibet’ when in reality it has been machine-made outside of the TAR.

In studies of the economies of other regions it has been observed that it is easier now for goods that were once linked to a specific region to be produced or procured anywhere, by anybody (Cohen, 2000). To take one example, because of factors such as advanced refrigeration technologies, quicker modes of transport, and overfishing in Japanese waters, the bluefin tuna used for sushi is now fished off the coast of Maine, shipped back to Japan’s wholesale fish market for auctioning, and then once again sent to the United States for sale in retail markets and high-end sushi restaurants (Bestor, 2001). Similarly, the increasing integration of Lhasa’s pang gdan economy with urban manufacturing areas in inland China has led to the separation of the pang gdan from its place of origin. And, yet, it is precisely this geographical disjunction that makes it possible for retailers to generate novel stories and meanings about the objects in an attempt to renegotiate assumptions about their authenticity, which adds value. For many consumers willingness to pay a high price for a commodity depends on the perception that it originated in an ‘exotic’ locale (Miller, 1987) and was produced by ‘natives’. Another poignant example can be seen in the cries of irony and surprise from the Western media when workers in a factory in Guangdong, China, discovered they were producing flags ordered

by the Tibetan government-in-exile representing an independent Tibet (“workers said they thought they were just producing colorful flags and did not realize their meaning”) (BBC News, 2008). When Japanese sushi is discovered to have come from the coast of Maine or if an apron is not made by Tibetan nomads but by factory workers in Fujian new stories are produced about them and their associated geographies, reconfiguring existing notions of social and economic networks.

5 ‘Revitalizing’ the apron: new meanings, new geographies

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

With regard to the contemporary transformation of consumerism in Lhasa, it is important to note that the representation and creation of the ‘Tibetanness’ of objects is a process that is not solely in the hands of consumers. In a paper on Tibetan carpets in Nepal Eric McGuckin has suggested that scholars should pay attention not only to the criteria by which different consumers construct the authenticity of Tibetan goods but also to the more indigenous forms of authenticity that emerge out of such discourses (1997). Ethnographic research on varying cultural ideas of authenticity with regard to material culture has been extremely useful in examining how power over ‘objective’ knowledge is formed and used (see, for example, Handler 1986; Steiner, 1994). While authenticity remains an important and useful concept, in this case I have found that the issue of whether or not a product is ‘authentic’ comes in and out of use only at certain times. For instance, for most apron merchants, machine-made aprons are considered inferior to handmade ones in terms of their composition but are not necessarily ‘inauthentic’. Brian Spooner (1986) has called the dialectical process between seller, buyer, and marketer that is involved in making something ‘authentic’ “socially ordered genuineness” (page 225), where authenticity changes depending on whose hands the object passes through (page 228). In this case once the apron-making machines began to improve, few people were able to tell the difference between machine-made and handmade aprons. The seller’s knowledge of changing demands (local and ‘foreign’) from both the producer’s side and the consumer’s side is crucial in informing the type of cultural, geographical, and aesthetic significance that is attributed to the profiting from the ‘place’ of pang gdan products. Next I present a story focusing on the intermediary role of a seller of pang gdan handicrafts that will serve to demonstrate how various discourses of authenticity are intertwined to form new pang gdan meanings and how such meanings serve to reattach place to objects.

From Kathmandu’s heyday as a hippie destination in the 1960s to its current position as a Himalayan trekking hub, much of its economy over the past fifty years has been dependent on tourism. Some of my foreign friends had told me that if I wanted to see some interesting things that are being done with old woolen aprons I should go and speak to the proprietor of a textile showroom who collects the old aprons and turns them into decorative wall hangings for foreign expats, tourists, and, more recently, upscale hotels in Lhasa (figure 4). I then headed out to a Tibetan neighborhood that attracts tourists interested in studying Tibetan Buddhism and made an appointment with the proprietor.

Figure 4. Decorative wall hangings made from old *snam bu pang gdan*.

When I stepped into the showroom (an open air enclosure under a corrugated tin roof), I was greeted by Pema, who gestured that I sit down in front of him, much in the style of a monk giving teachings to a student of Buddhism. Pema is a middle-aged Tibetan entrepreneur, born in Nepal, who has recently made several trips to Lhasa in order to sell decorative household items—such as bags and wall hangings—made out of old, discarded, handwoven *snam bu* aprons (of which there seems to be a surplus now that many women prefer to buy synthetic aprons). Some of the larger items, priced at well over US\$100, are aimed at very wealthy groups of tourists who visit Tibet. When I asked him to describe his trips to Lhasa, he replied:

Pema: “You know, now, there is a train coming to Tibet. And of course the train can come. But in the harsh winter, who holds Tibet back on its feet? The Tibetans. The nomads. Because they are the ones who can really survive in Tibet, work in Tibet, they are born in Tibet, and brought up in Tibet. So what we are trying to do is we are trying to support them. How do we support them? By recycling these things [aprons].”

Tina: “How does it work when you get the old *pang gdan*?”

Pema: “So what we do is [take] the good ones, we restore it back, we join it back, stitch them back and make it into a big blanket There are many items around in the Lhasa market, and everything is either from China or Nepal or from India. But these aprons have the real energy, which has been woven in Tibet before, in this place. So this is the original Tibetan stuff If I hang this wall hanging up in Tibet in some open place, all these old ladies and old grandpas and all ... I want to remind them, ‘You were like this before.’ And how are we now? We should be like before.”

At first I was not sure what to make of this; I spent much of the interview shifting uncomfortably from my position on the floor, feeling skeptical about Pema’s claims to

understand the livelihoods of nomads and my position as a young foreign female researcher, and wondering if I should mention that I was not in town to study Buddhism. The conversation, however, was such a rich tangle of different discourses: the ‘energy’ of the past was attached to a specific place (Tibet) and people (nomads), and both the place and the people were ostensibly linked to his products for sale. Pema’s somewhat embellished statements suggest that he is aware that his foreign clients’ demand for ‘authentic’ Tibetan products means that the items should be made *in Tibet by Tibetans*. The irony is that a high percentage of the very pang gdan that Pema uses to make his wall hangings are not even made in Tibet but made in non-Tibetan villages in Nepal. Yet, his pang gdan hanging is ‘real’ for numerous reasons. Firstly, because a number of tourists are now aware that many items in the Lhasa marketplace are actually manufactured in places outside of Tibet, these hangings are seen as more intimately connected to the Tibetan landscape, and therefore, as Pema puts it, as the ‘original stuff’. Secondly, unlike the other goods sold in Lhasa, he says that they provoke a relationship with elderly (and therefore somehow more ‘traditional’) Tibetans. Thirdly, they are handmade with the ‘real energy’ of the past and in contrast with what he considers the rampant consumerism and contamination of Tibetans in the TAR today. Here, the ‘Tibetanness’ of the aprons is both created and reinforced by Pema’s place-based narrative, various strands of which are taken from his own detached position as an exiled observer of an urbanizing Lhasa as well as from his understanding of what tourists will purchase while visiting the TAR. By putting these recycled apron items on the market, he insists that he is supporting the nomads; curiously, Pema—who lives in Nepal—puts himself in a position of authority to represent what Tibetan nomadic space should look like as well. The value of the goods is based on the production of a pure, preindustrial aesthetic that is no more: these are secondhand aprons that are no longer in use, yet their ‘vitality’ and ‘energy’ live on. Pema’s narrative of the revitalization of woolen aprons is linked to larger place-based narratives of decline that came up in conversations with other merchants and traders.

6 Narratives of decline: the past as ‘natural’, the present as ‘fake’

“K told me about a TV show where butter sellers cheat by putting a potato into the butter mixture to make it heavier and less pure—a woman went to the police because of this. Met a woman, 81 yrs old, Seems very skeptical of people today. ... ‘People don’t pay immediately like they do now.’ ‘Now everybody has an education so you can’t trust anyone.’ ‘Back in the old society⁽⁴⁾ the quality of items was much better, the people were very good, business was good. Goods from India were of better quality, you didn’t have to pay tax like now’” (field notes, Lhasa, 30 November 2005).

In my conversations with both old and young traders the one prominently recurring theme was that the quality of commodities in the past far surpassed the quality of contemporary items. Not only were manufactured goods considered of better quality but even the food was more ‘pure’. Everything in general was simply more ‘real’, unlike commodities today, which were often described as ‘fake’, ‘contaminated’, or ‘impure’. One elderly Tibetan trader who ended up escaping from Lhasa and moving permanently to Kalimpong in 1959 recalled what goods were like in both Tibet and Kalimpong when he led mule caravans between those two towns in the 1940s and 1950s (see figure 5):

“*Go snam* (felt-like wool) was British. It was such good quality ... it would stay together in a roll and you could stand it on its end and it would not fall down. All this stuff was available in Kalimpong ... oranges were sweet and tasty; for 1 Rupee you could get

⁽⁴⁾The Tibetan term, ‘old society’ (*spyi tshogs rnying pa*) is temporally and politically significant as it is often used by people in Tibetan-speaking areas of China to refer to a pre-1950s Tibet. It has been used in history textbooks to connote an unchanging, pre-Communist, feudal Tibetan society (Schwartz, 1995, page 150) but is more often used simply to mark the time before the Chinese arrived.

Figure 5. Map depicting trade routes between Lhasa and Kathmandu and Lhasa and Kalimpong. The road through the border of Tibet and India was closed in 1962 due to the Sino-Indian War but reopened again for trade purposes in 2006.

100 oranges; things back then, fruit, for instance, was counted in the hundreds, it was so abundant You could eat as much as you would like Now you hardly find them at all. There was much better sheep in Tibet, everything was better Reds were redder, even colors were better. You could get anything in Lhasa! Everything was available! Man can create things ... he can manufacture ... but he cannot create natural things. You would think that with more things our life would have improved by now.”

“Reds were redder, even colors were better.” Here, I find that Raymond Williams’s study of English historical perspective through pastoral literature in *The Country and the City* provides a window through which to examine traders’ narratives concerning the items they dealt with. In the context of traders’ experiences in Tibet there is a common narrative whereby ‘natural’, ‘real’, or living things are seen to be from a specific time and place—in this case from rural, pre-1950 Tibet—and items nowadays are considered ‘fake’ or ‘impure’. What Williams calls a ‘structure of feeling’ (1985 [1973]) is persistently created throughout history. Through actual, lived experiences, there is a “felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time”, reflecting the ideology that things were somehow much better back in the day (2001 [1961], page 47). While there has always been a recurring, familiar nostalgia for an ordered and ‘pure’ past, such virtues or notions—sweet abundant oranges, better sheep, vibrant colors—“mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question” (page 12). The shifting narratives of what makes certain commodities ‘pure’ and ‘natural’ are linked to changing economic contexts and representations of space.

The contamination of food and the fake goods reflect the separation of people from products and places; the origins of which were once known. But how consistent are these

memories of a ‘pure’ past? In direct contrast to the stories of how items were wonderfully natural back then, there are many traders who remember dirt: plenty of it. An elderly trader named Kulbir remembered that there were few vegetables in Lhasa—no tomatoes, no cauliflower—and those that were sold were often rotten. He noted the lack of rice and the fact that you had to be rich to afford mutton. There were stories concerning how the wool trade was plagued by untrustworthy types who were actively working to defile the wool. Kulbir would have to poke the big bales of wool when they arrived in Kalimpong to check that there was not anything else in them; “sometimes they stuff it with sand”, he said. “Sometimes they put rotten leather inside.” Similarly, I heard one story about a trader who used to bring wool to Kalimpong from northern and western Tibet in the 1940s and 1950s. To make the wool heavier and more profitable, the nomads would dip it in water and urine; when it dried, it became sticky and heavy. In addition dirt and sand might be mixed in. The trader who told me this story laughed, saying that they were not exporting wool from Tibet; “they were exporting Tibetan sand to India!” (figure 6).

Although these two sets of remembrances—of ‘pure’, ‘real’ products versus ‘dirty’ wool—demonstrate that the recurring theme of “the good old people succeeded by the bad new people” is, indeed, a “seductive song”, they are still of significance (Williams, 1985 [1973], page 83). Whether or not things were, in fact, any ‘cleaner’ or ‘dirtier’ in the past is not likely to be determined anytime soon (nor are these attributes necessarily binary opposites) but what I would like to emphasize here is that the attachment of values to objects is directly related to changes in the geographies of production. The remembered ‘purity’ of fruit or wool, for instance, is set against the current influx of cheap goods coming from China and is therefore located in a very specific time and place: a pre-1950 Tibet or Kalimpong. The distance felt between people and their formerly ‘knowable’ foods or commodities (although

Figure 6. Sorting and weighing Tibetan wool, Kalimpong, circa 1930s (photograph taken by K C Pyne, courtesy Kodak Stores, Kalimpong).

the *kinds* of people and goods are specific to different geopolitical situations) is part of larger historical processes of capitalist expansion.

Take, for instance, what Pema has to say about the ‘purity’ of the older wool aprons in contrast to what he considers the contaminated wool of today:

“Sixty years ago, the wool itself had very good genes. The environment was very clean, and we had very good animals. So we compare it with the wool which is now in the 21st century and there is lot of difference. There is a lot of dead fibers these days ... these days what they do is they use lot of chemicals, mixtures, and then sometimes even you find nylon and polyesters involved with the woolen materials. And they even tag them with very good names, like sometimes they say like ‘Giordano’ or whatever—you know, big companies, they say it’s woolen. But if you thoroughly check the material and look into it, you can find oil products.”

When this handmade aesthetic is emphasized, the tourist (or the anthropologist in this case) is made to feel connected with an imaginary nomadic weaver in a precapitalist Tibetan rural scene. As noted earlier, like the shirts he mentions that are tagged with ‘Giordano’, many of the pang gdan are from Nepal. Again, control over geographical information—in this instance, understanding that pang gdan from Tibet seem more ‘authentic’ than those made in Nepal, even though Sherpas in northern Nepal weave similar aprons—is important in order to manipulate the object’s meanings to fit the agenda of the moment (Steiner, 1994). The issue, then, is not about ‘authentic’ versus ‘inauthentic’, or ‘pure’ versus ‘dirty’ items but about who has the authority to create and sell accounts of authenticity that are, at the same time, geographic accounts of place.

Pema’s narrative is reflective of the shift from one market segment to another, where the value of the goods is based on a particular perception of authenticity or preindustrial aesthetic and the items are marketed as such in order to gain a monopoly price. Indeed, he meshes Western and local Tibetan environmental discourses and perceptions of the market with his experience of the global tourist market.⁽⁵⁾ Wool, according to Pema, is ‘hampered’ or killed due to global ‘friction’: such as the development of chemical processing, the creation of nation-state boundaries, and Tibetan nomads who embrace the new Chinese consumerism. His solution to this friction is to market recycled woolen pang gdan from Tibet. The following statement expresses these thematic connections:

“There is friction in the planet. Every time there is friction, every time cars are moving, planes moving, and the roads are paved, and it’s so hot, and houses are getting built up everywhere ... there is a cause for the wool getting hampered. So what is the cause? The cause is the modern high technology of the oil products. The animals are dying in Tibet, yaks are getting killed by all these chemicals. And sometimes there is a big problem, because sometimes they say, ‘This is Nepal, [gesturing a border with his hands] and this is Tibet.’ ‘This is Nepal, this is China.’ And the yaks cannot come and eat grass. Cannot come and eat grass [on the other side of the border] in the winter when there is no grass in Tibet. In olden days, when there is no grass in Tibet, the yaks used to come down to Nepal and eat grass The *drokpas* [nomads] can have more wool. The necessary movement is to recycle the old products and show them to the world, so that they [the nomads] will understand. And to show them the way they used to weave in Tibet, because they want to have TVs at home, they want to go for karaoke If we can explain to them, if we can do something for these nomads by explaining and

⁽⁵⁾For more information on Tibetan environmental discourses see Emily Yeh’s unpublished paper on the ‘green Tibetan’ (Yeh, 2007). Originally based on collaborations between exiled Tibetans and Westerners, these discourses take on a very different kind of subjectivity in the TAR as a result of both new Chinese links to NGOs and increases in state control.

upgrading their products in a foreign market, which is better than their own economic life, then that's it."

After Pema gets up to take care of a customer, another Tibetan man in the shop (perhaps an assistant) notices me silently admiring the wall hangings and says, "this is old, hand-dyed, hand-woven wool from our culture. *We must keep it alive* as much as possible, we must save every scrap and use it" (my emphasis). What is significant here is the insistence on revitalizing the wool, keeping it "alive as much as possible", by reinserting values of 'purity' and life into the wool in order to make it 'real' again. These discourses do not therefore expose a clear-cut opposition between cleanliness and impurity. The reconnecting revitalizing that is taking place is both a spatial and a temporal action, highly dependent on locating or placing the wool back in Tibet. It is wool that is not only Tibetan but also was woven in Tibet before Tibet became part of China. The irony, of course, is that these items were not actually made in Tibet and they are being sold not to nomads but to foreign tourists and wealthy Chinese and Tibetans.⁽⁶⁾

7 Dead labor, living wool, and new economic geographies

Given the examples above, the pang gdan economy seems to be in the middle of several transformations with regard to the value that consumers place on the method of production. In tandem with shifts in the geographies of handmade versus machine-made products there are changes in what it means for an object to be 'handmade' or 'machine-made'. 'Handmade' may very well still signify 'old-fashioned' or 'traditional' to a majority of Lhasans but to some new groups of consumers (especially a growing number of wealthy Chinese tourists or Tibetans who may have lived in cities like Beijing) owning a handmade, decorative item from Tibet may actually distinguish one as 'modern' or a well-to-do person who cares about high-quality, unique items. In some cases, however, the consumption of handmade apron products may signify a return to, or a refixing of, a 'Tibetanness' that is felt to have been distant or missing, particularly amongst middle-class Tibetans who spent most of their educational or professional lives in other parts of China.

Changes in the Chinese economy and the rise of a Tibetan middle class in Lhasa mean that 'old' and 'traditional' items such as woolen pang gdan may now be seen as valuable for a new reason: they symbolize distance and rarity to consumers who may be used to fast-paced urban life. Pema advertises his woolen items as providing a potential bridge between nomad producers and wealthy consumers, the past and the present, or nature and urban life; paradoxically, a sense of distance still needs to be maintained. Sellers will market ordinary goods by making them distant, exotic, and yet somehow accessible at the same time (Simmel, 1990 [1907]). The resulting tension between distance and accessibility is formed with the acute knowledge of a particular market, its history, its producers, and the tastes of its consumers. The very *use* and display of this new form of pang gdan (not as an everyday clothing item but as a piece of household décor) further separates those who can afford these labor-intensive, high-end objects of tradition and those who cannot.

Over dinner in Tibet, Dawa, a seller of woolen apron handicrafts from Lhasa, also brought up the idea that the older pang gdan wool is 'alive' and that the use of machines in some ways acts to 'kill' the wool. He said:

"When you have wool, if it is machine carded, the machine doesn't have—it doesn't have a mind, so the fibers are actually broken down, so that is kind of like removing the life

⁽⁶⁾ Notable examples of studies that address the geographical separation between producer and consumer and the strategic marketing of place in order to 'bridge the gap' between buyer and seller include Carol Hendrickson's work on Guatemalan handicrafts in mail-order catalogs (1996), and Sharon Hepburn's work on clothing sold in Kathmandu that is marketed as 'Tibetan' but actually produced by Nepalis (2000).

of the wool. If it is machine carded, then you just take the life out of the wool ... you are actually taking the life out of the wool.”

The various attempts to revitalize wool for the new middle-class Chinese and Tibetan market also reflects the movement to reconnect or ‘fix’ places and geopolitical or cultural relationships that are considered ‘lost’ or ‘broken’. The idea that wool from pre-1950 Tibet is ‘alive’ and that new, machine-carded wool is ‘dead’ is reminiscent of Marx’s notion of ‘dead labor’, where products and the means of production (eg, wool and machines) are seen to be productive in and of themselves. Revitalizing the wool by recycling it and turning it into a handmade product not only involves conjuring back living labor; the wool itself is seen as endowed with living properties (not the laborers who make the woolen handicrafts) and therefore recognized as having more value. The ‘real energy’ said to exist in the wool is thus more than just a simple opposition to ‘dead’ wool. It is laden with multiple values: involving a change of location (the use of a ‘Made in Tibet’ label as opposed to a ‘Made in China’ one for instance) and a change in temporality (‘It was produced like this in the past’). Talking about the ‘real energy’ of the wool is also one way to make visible a Tibet—for a profit—that appears to have become a blind spot amidst the larger, China-driven economic shifts of the region. What this does in turn, however, is obfuscate the location of the producers of the object, who may not actually be Tibetan or living in Tibet. Since there are no inherent meanings in objects themselves—rather, the meanings and uses of goods have always been formed by the *people* involved in their production, exchange, and consumption—the values that are attached to wool at its consumption stage can be very different from those attached to it during production. With the emergence of new geographical paths of capital, these narratives expose different—and occasionally conflicting—valuation systems: for instance the silky new ‘urban’ aprons signify a modern or sophisticated wearer; new machine-made aprons mean a loss of the old virtues—the traditional way of life—and a loss of high-quality production skills. Someone who sells high-end handmade Tibetan goods claims the authority to weave place-based narratives about nomads or other producers like apron weavers, transforming machines into Chinese killers and reanimating the ‘dead’ Tibetan wool for consumers. But it was never the objects themselves that could act in the first place.

8 Conclusion

One of my main goals in this paper was to highlight the importance of place-based narratives about objects in the study of uneven development, particularly in regards to contemporary globalization processes in western China. Instead of treating ethnographic studies of material culture as a separate field from macrolevel studies of political economy, I have argued for the integration of both and have demonstrated that larger-scale transformations in transport networks and the means of production redistribute spatial narratives of things in ways that do not necessarily line up with the actual trajectories of the goods. As railroads are extended to connect China with Europe and Southeast Asia, as new airstrips are built in western parts of China, and as parts of Tibet are built up in the name of national integration and stability, the geographies of former trade networks are being reshuffled. Yet, stories about the dirtiness of the old wool trade, the rapid production of new machine-made pang gdan in Sichuan, and the revitalizing of ‘dead’ Tibetan wool also contribute to the social transformation of regional and national geographies.

In an era often characterized by the intensifying mobility of commodities and credit, the origins of some goods are seemingly becoming more and more opaque and difficult to trace. A study of the fixing or refixing of place to objects is important in order to strengthen an understanding of the contributions of social experiences to the processes of globalization. Attaching a Tibet of a specific time and place to an object is therefore less about the knowledge of the actual origin of the commodity than it is about creating and maintaining a structure of

feeling amidst tremendous social and economic change—sometimes for a profit. As new networks are created or older trading links are reopened in order to facilitate the movement of commodities, different places are valued for their economic or social capital and new configurations of place-based narratives emerge. It is my hope that this study can provide a useful basis for future research on the role of material culture and place in changing and uneven development.

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