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The Border Worlds of Wim van Spengen

Preface to “Beyond Annapurna, or How to Interpret Success in Himalayan Trade”

Wim van Spengen’s “Beyond Annapurna, or How to Interpret Success in Himalayan Trade,” published here for the first time, sums up much of van Spengen’s valuable contributions to the social and economic study of everyday life in the Himalayas. Although many scholars have worked to dispel the myth that the Himalayan region is a remote, “unspoiled world,” van Spengen has been able to clearly demonstrate how longstanding and far-reaching trade connections have unfolded—and continue to develop—in the Himalayas and throughout Asia more generally. Through his work with the Nyingshaba of Manang, whose trade circuits connect Nepal with the “wider Southeast Asian economy” (a group that was given the first Nepali passports in 1962!), he understood all too well that Asian globalization—a term that shot to popularity in the 1990s—was certainly not a “new” phenomenon.

In the piece that follows, van Spengen writes that without openings to northern mountain passes, the Nyingshaba successfully turned towards Southeast Asia to trade. This is a rather different story from other work on Himalayan trade that mostly focuses on routes oriented towards Tibet. And yet, he shows that the geographical orientation of Nyingshaba trading patterns was not simply based on an environmental determinism (their physical position in Manang), nor was it culturally determined (a cultural proclivity to cross-border friendships), nor was it the result of a set of purely economic opportunities. His attention to the complexities of trade—that commodities bought and sold are subject to geopolitical ebbs and flows: supply, demand, droughts, embargoes, long-term historical and political struggles—follows in the tradition of Fernand Braudel, Eric Wolf, Giovanni Arrighi, and Wim Wertheim, all of whom were well known for highlighting

the dynamic contributions of relatively small social groups within larger world systems. However, he was also a realist, warning his audience of the danger of romanticizing agency. “Not all frontier populations are in a position to actively change their life for the better,” for everyday lives in the borderlands are tempered by political and institutional constraints, power imbalances, inequalities, and heavy competition.

Wim’s interest in geographical frontiers paralleled his interest in the borderlands of academic fields. It would be a disservice to classify him as a geographer simply based on his Ph.D. A true interdisciplinary, he read widely: in history, economics, anthropology, geography, politics, sociology, and literature. As Alex McKay has noted in his tribute to Wim in this volume of *HIMALAYA*, the word “modest” was often used to refer to van Spengen. It is true. After meeting him for the first time at the International Association for Tibetan Studies meeting in Bonn in 2006, I mentioned that his Tibetan Border Worlds was very influential during the writing of my Ph.D. “Oh, that thing,” he said, dismissing it with a wave of a hand. We proceeded to have an engaging conversation, and refreshingly, not a word about academic work or trade was spoken. We chatted about libraries around the world, international travel, our families—other worlds that were just as important and motivating to Wim.

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