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1 Flows and Frictions in Trans-Himalayan Spaces

An Introduction

Willem van Schendel and Gunnel Cederlöf

Abstract

This volume presents a conversation between historians and anthropologists who work at the crosscurrents of Asian borderland studies and Trans-Himalayan studies. We focus on the evolving relationships of time, space, and place, while combining the ethnographically historical and the historically ethnographic. In line with many recent studies, this volume challenges the conventional foregrounding of nation-states (a short-lived phenomenon in the longer view) without, however, resorting to the fantasy of disembodied flows. Contemporary events require long-term perspectives since past mobilities underlie many of today's complex conflicts. Anchored in the region's stunning landscapes (but not determined by them), flows are negotiated in webs of human interaction (but not defined by them).

Keywords: Trans-Himalayan spaces, India-China corridor, flow and friction, spatial history, Myanmar, borderlands

This book deals with a vast region of rugged terrain, high mountains, monsoon-fed rivers and marshy lowlands. It is a landscape that may look like a formidable natural obstacle to mobility, but the contributions to this book show otherwise. They explore the abundance of movement, connections and flows that have given this space, straddling the eastern Himalayas, its historical shape and its contemporary dynamism.

It is not only the forbidding landscape itself that seemingly creates obstacles to movement: the region is also crisscrossed by state borders that

have hardened and become more militarised during the past century. Today, these borders separate the territories of India, Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar), Bangladesh, China, and Thailand.¹ And yet, flows across the region never stopped; they merely slowed down, changed in character, made themselves invisible, or found other routes. The authors discuss these changes in the past and the present, and look at specific places and situations in order to address broader questions of how interconnections and flows have been mediated, facilitated or blocked. The political fragmentation of this region has always had an influence on mobility, also during times of imperial control. At times, it has worked to facilitate mobility that an imperial government sought to block, or produced regional conflicts that enhanced military mobility but complicated the same for civilians. Even so, the studies in this volume show that armed conflicts certainly created hurdles, but they were never able to prevent the movement of goods, animals, humans or ideas.

The chapters show that it makes little sense to assume rigid edges to this part of the trans-Himalayan space. Territorial borders certainly do not provide such edges. Firstly, borders have been extraordinarily mobile, unstable and permeable over time. Secondly, there is no reason to assume that unstable, permeable borders were prevalent in the past but have disappeared with the emergence of modern nation-states. It is misleading to apply a 'Westphalian logic' that takes sovereign nation-states as points of departure. It is true that the states administering the region established border controls, state-to-state agreements, and strict interdictions of cross-border mobility. But focusing on these measures obscures the fact that there are other layers of control that continue to facilitate movement of goods and people across national borders. The chapters highlight how flows negotiate this multi-layered political landscape across time. The authors engage with the movement of people and everything that people bring, from goods to ideas. They focus on several commodities, especially jade, capital, drugs, guns and animals. This allows us to compare flows within and across a limited region over time, as well as flows between locations far apart at a single point in time.

1 This book focuses on the easternmost part of the Himalayas (which we call the India-China Corridor), not on the entire Himalayan massif. It seeks to contribute to discussions about flows and spaces, multiple state space, and multistate margins – and to link these to two emerging scholarly fields, the study of Asian borderlands and Trans-Himalayan studies. On multiple state space, see Shneiderman, 'Central Himalayas', pp. 289-312. On multistate margins, see Smyer Yü, 'Introduction', pp. 11-41. For a recent enrichment of the literature on the eastern Himalayas, see contributions to Smyer Yü and Dean, eds., *Yunnan-Burma-Bengal Corridor*.

The volume is a conversation between historians and anthropologists who work at the crosscurrents of Asian borderland studies and Trans-Himalayan studies. Their contributions allow us to reflect on evolving relationships of time, space and place, as well as on the importance of combining the ethnographically historical and the historically ethnographic. In line with many recent studies, the volume challenges the conventional foregrounding of nation-states (a short-lived phenomenon in the longer view²) without, however, resorting to the fantasy of disembodied flows. The volume also asserts that contemporary events require long-term perspectives in order for us to understand how past mobilities underlie many of today's complex conflicts. With an ethnographic eye on places, we can analyse how flows of ideas and goods can alter the meanings of those places, ideas and goods. People do not have to travel themselves to be influenced by movement. Anchored in the region's stunning landscapes (but not determined by them), flows are negotiated in webs of human interaction (but not defined by them).

A corridor between India and China

In the research collaboration that has supported the conversations of which this volume is an outcome, we have used the word 'corridor' as a marker to frame mobility and flows.³ The term encompasses fluctuating and shifting – even volatile – movements across an often simultaneously changing socio-political geography. Mobility marks and makes such a geography. Localities come to life or fade away with the energy of movement. Market towns emerge and disappear with the movement of goods and all attendant interactions. Refugee camps mushroom out of an acute situation, connecting places that are sometimes far apart, only to become permanent, disappear completely, or turn into townships. The corridor's geography is under constant reconfiguration.

As a geographical expanse, the 'India-China Corridor' (as we shall refer to it from now on) is best thought of as a broad swathe of land that stretches from the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan in China, crossing the eastern Himalayas and its southern promontory, the Indo-Burma Range. Thus, it is part of the

2 Using the nation-state to frame research is widely known as methodological nationalism. Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 'Methodological Nationalism', pp. 301-334.

3 'The India-China Corridor', including the team members Gunnel Cederlöf (P.I.), Willem van Schendel, Mandy Sadan, Dan Smyer Yü and Arupjiyoti Saikia, funded by the Swedish Research Council 2016-19.

eastern trans-Himalayan space of exchange, but it does not cover the entire Himalayan massif. Interaction has a long history here and social life has never been fixed. Tharaphi Than and Htoo May show this clearly in their chapter on Sittwe in Rakhine State, Myanmar. When citizenship came to be defined by ethnicity and religion, long-time citizens found that they had been re-categorised and were forced to move into 'immigrant' townships. Emphasising mobility in a study of a particular locality does not imply that we have reservations about people's sense of being rooted in a place. Rather, it highlights our point that, even in places associated with lengthy histories of belonging, we must take account of how flows of people, things and ideas continually shape and change places. Generations of people may live in a particular place, but they also travel, return, and receive visitors. Influences from afar are forever transforming any place.⁴

Countless studies with roots in nineteenth-century ethnography have assumed that the people of the 'India-China Corridor' are best understood as a smorgasbord of isolated and place-bound cultures. Following the external and racialised views of colonial explorers and conquerors, they have been represented as 'primitives' and 'tribals.' Colonial ethnographers tended to label people living outside the colonially administered territories and refusing to negotiate or yield to power as 'wild' and 'uncivilised.'⁵ People placed into these categories were either praised for their assumed closeness to nature and simple customs, or judged for their so-called backwardness and lack of development. What followed was a century of ethnographic studies that focused on single 'tribes' and their supposedly narrow worlds. These studies contributed to a long tradition of obscuring their mobility and connections with the wider world. Such biased wisdom circulated widely (Figure 1.1) and continues to shape outsiders' popular views as well as state policies. In her chapter, Joy Pachuau details such encounters and processes for people in the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) in Northeast India.⁶

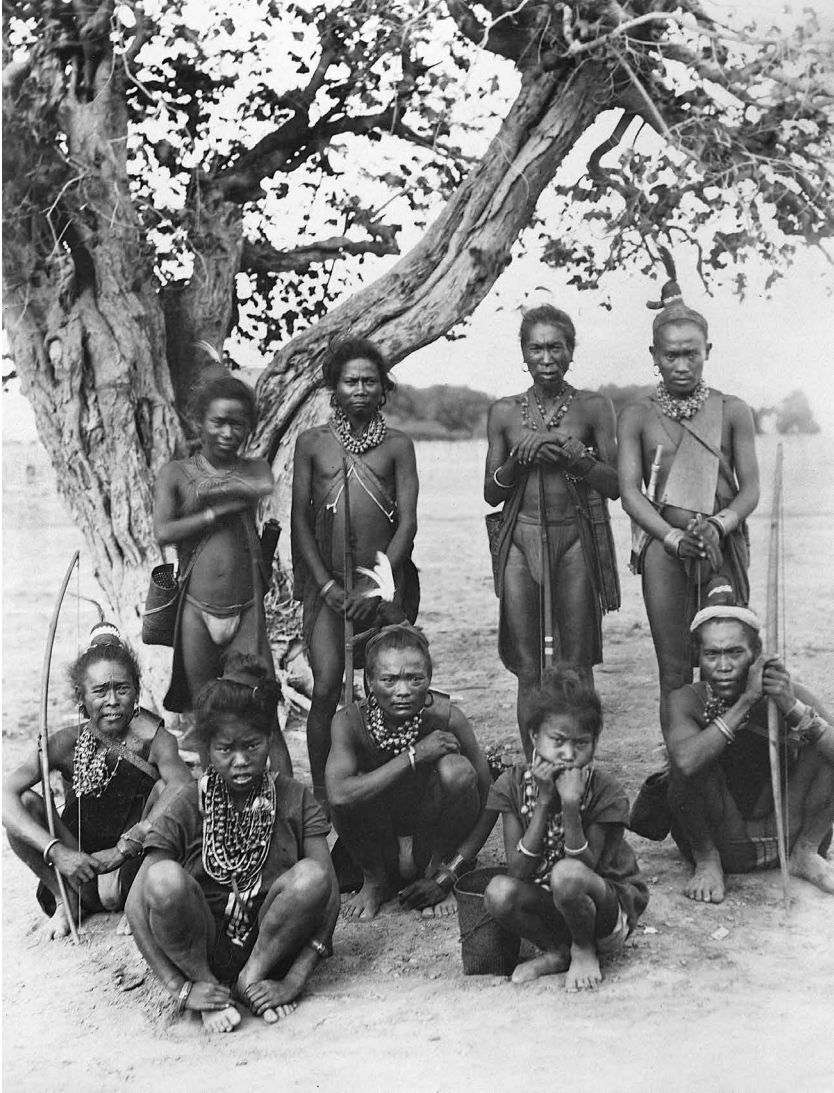
Each chapter, in its own way, demonstrates the continuously shifting interaction of places and mobility. And in every encounter, there is friction. In Anna Tsing's words: 'Friction is not just about slowing things down. Friction is required to keep global power in motion.' For example, in the India-China

4 Than and May, chapter 9 in this volume.

5 For example, a map of the 1850s has this legend over the area now known as Chin State (Myanmar) and Mizoram (India): 'Unexplored Mass of Hills inhabited by a great many Tribes of Indo-Chinese type, in low stages of civilization.' In the accompanying text, the area is described as 'inhabited by a vast variety of wild tribes of Indo-Chinese kindred (known as Kookees, Nagas, Khyens, and by many more specific names.' Yule, 'Geography of Burma', pp. 54-108, at 54 and 65.

6 Pachuau, chapter 5 in this volume.

Figure 1.1 Photograph captioned ‘Group of Wild Chins’⁷



Corridor, friction works as a double-edged sword in forging new overland connections. On the one hand, the construction of new roads (often for extractive or military purposes) created new pathways that made motion easier and more efficient. On the other hand, they were attempts to channel

⁷ Photographer unidentified and date unknown (early twentieth century). Credit: Ethnologisches Museum, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

movement and control where people and goods travelled.⁸ The chapters in this volume show that such ‘efficient’ roads may trigger the use of other pathways, away from public sight and across harsh terrain, to make sure that items – from daily commodities to guns and drugs – reach otherwise sealed-off places. They show how friction produces new forms of mobility.

Geography as destiny?

The India-China Corridor is a truly ancient passageway. Current evidence points to the arrival of the earliest humans here at least 40,000 years ago. They came from the west, moving along the southern margins of the Himalayas and along the northern coast of the Bay of Bengal. Some settled in the richly biodiverse environments of what are now Bangladesh and Northeast India; others pushed on – across the eastern Himalayas and the Indo-Burma mountain range, via the marshy lowlands and into the hills and high plateaus, ultimately peopling Southeast and East Asia.⁹ Ever since, mobility has been the hallmark of these trans-Himalayan spaces, and yet, scholars have often downplayed it in favour of territorialised perspectives, framed by the geographical contours of the – historically very recent – nation-states.

A new generation of researchers is now actively involved in overcoming this handicap. This is easier said than done because most of us were trained to foreground national frameworks and fixed entities and identities. Academic cultures, reference circles, and career paths also remain remarkably hidebound and compartmentalised. Had the authors of this volume stayed within such frameworks they would never have met, being based in the separate Area Studies domains of South, Southeast, and East Asia studies. Geography can be academic destiny. To help the process of deframing this space (in both spatial and disciplinary terms) and to suggest how to reframe it in multiple ways, the ‘India-China Corridor’ research programme has organised meetings in this region to bring together scholars working on flows and frictions. The chapters in this volume are one of the outcomes of these meetings. They show how the early-modern to modern periods, especially, have been shaped by human interactions in and between places that we now know as Assam, Nagaland, Kachin State, Rakhine State, and the Shan-Dai borderlands of Myanmar and Yunnan. All demonstrate our need to understand flows and frictions as perpetually joined, as partners

8 Tsing, *Friction*, especially pp. 5-6.

9 Bae et al., ‘On the Origin’, pp. 1-7.

in an endless dance. But who leads? David Ludden emphatically makes the point that mobility always precedes attempts at regimenting space by means of territorial control. Social space is essentially mobile space, and territorialisation of social power is often a brutal intervention to regulate it.¹⁰ With different takes on the question, the authors show how mobility and territorial control have been dynamically and differently intertwined. Flows may alter or circumvent spatial control, and regimented space can cause multiple identities to grow and move places.

Flows are never smooth, and mobility always comes with obstacles. From the Indo-Burma mountain range to the Yunnan plateau, and from the Indian Ocean to the Himalayas, a traveller will need to cross huge monsoon-swollen rivers at sea level and face thousand-metre climbs. The friction of terrain is very palpable – the terrain itself has always been a challenge to anyone travelling here. This includes areas where humans hardly ever set foot: the Himalayan glaciers. These are instrumental in providing the conditioning ecologies and seasonal variations that shape mobility. The climate, the seasons, and the ecozones have put pressure on human livelihoods and activity. As a result, researchers still routinely assume that geography is destiny, and that verticality has always constrained mobility. This assumption is refreshingly challenged in the chapters of this book, both in those that reach back centuries and in those that focus on recent times. The historical perspective on flows and frictions is developed in chapters by Jianxiong Ma and Gunnel Cederlöf (connecting the Shan-Dai territories with Burma and Qing China), Joy Pachuau (on the long-term mobility that influenced the Lushai Hills), and Arupjyoti Saikia (on Assam's connections with neighbouring trade networks). Contemporary flows and frictions are highlighted in chapters by Jelle Wouters (on Nagaland-Bangladesh connections), Tharaphi Than and Htoo May (on migrants in Rakhine state (Myanmar) and Henrik Kloppenborg Møller (on jade connections between the Kachin and Shan states in Myanmar and international markets).

It is clear that during the past century and a half 'distance-demolishing technologies'¹¹ have brought about considerable time-space compression.¹² That said, we should resist three common assumptions. The first is that previously mobility was obstructed. There may have been occasional blockages

10 Ludden, chapter 2 in this volume.

11 '[D]istance-demolishing technologies – railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology ... changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states [and] diminished the friction of terrain.' Scott, *Art*, p. xii.

12 Harvey, *Condition*.

but, mostly, travelling simply took longer. Just think of the centuries-old transportation system based on mule caravans moving between Yunnan, Sichuan, and Tibet.¹³

The second erroneous assumption is that time-space compression happened across the board. On the contrary, it was more noticeable in some parts of the India-China Corridor than in others. Moreover, that which allowed a speedy passage for some people may have caused obstacles to others. Whether in colonial times or today, the construction of roads and railways serves the purposes of those who run the state. Moving along a highway or railway will definitely shorten your travel time, but only if it takes you to the places where you want to go and if you can pass the checkpoints and pay the fees. With such frictions, many prefer the long, winding and poorly maintained routes that also allow access – but only for those who can locate the paths or enter the social networks that will open them up. In other words, time-space compression is related to social power. In his chapter, Møller speaks of opaque networks of illicit trade that include marriage relations. He discusses the friction of bribes, taxes, road quality, and war. Ma and Cederlöf found that much the same applied in the same territories 150 years earlier. At that time, flows across the difficult terrain were conditioned by local kinship relations and political control through ties to the Burmese Court and the Ming and Qing bureaucracy in China. Flows were also considerably structured by travellers' linkages to cross-border merchant networks. Knowledge about the places and routes where time-space compression was more favourable was, and still is, a well-guarded domain.

The third mistaken assumption is that time-space compression has been a linear process that accelerated over time, spurred on by capital and technology. In reality, its pace fluctuated. For example, it advanced suddenly and rapidly during the Second World War, with new airfields and metalled roads, only to retreat in the aftermath, leaving a rash of abandoned, overgrown airfields and neglected, potholed roads.¹⁴

The extremely varied geography, ecology and climate that characterise the India-China Corridor make their mark on social life and spatial interaction. Uplands, high mountain ranges, and deep ravines structure the pathways that connect villages and towns, irrespective of their location. In Nagaland, towns are on mountaintops, and in the Shan-Dai region they are in the flat basins and surrounding hills. Travelling in the lowlands includes negotiating

13 Ma and Ma, 'Mule Caravans', pp. 24-42.

14 Cederlöf, chapter 4, Møller, chapter 8 and Ma, chapter 3 in this volume.

rivers and marshes that seasonally swell from snow melting in the Himalayas and from monsoon rains. The rugged landscapes and the resulting friction of terrain of the India-China Corridor shape overland mobility in specific ways. Mountain passes, river courses, and valleys continue to guide flows. Despite today's modern infrastructure, long established network nodes and pinch points still play a part in structuring mobility. This occurs especially where old technologies of mobility persist, such as mule caravans, small boats, bamboo bridges across mountain streams or people carrying loads on their backs. Even though the reach of railways and motorable roads has increased, old transport technologies have not been marginalised as much as one might think. In many parts of the Corridor, roads (let alone railways) are few and far between, and people often avoid them out of fear of military presence, police or forest department checkpoints, or guerrilla attacks. The old routes and trails are still in use and effectively link people across the Corridor and well beyond. These old technologies embody a huge store of knowledge about how to navigate mobility and territorial control.¹⁵ Magnus Marsden argues that these pathways must 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.¹⁶

Thus, pathways and the infrastructures that sustain them are more flexible than the landscapes that they traverse. In the India-China Corridor, geography is highly relevant, but not destiny.

The production of ignorance

Scholars and policy makers have rarely understood the dynamics of the India-China Corridor. Generally speaking, they have been dazzled by its

15 According to Martin Saxer, a pathway can be understood as 'a configuration that is at once geographical and social. A pathway is thus not just another word for trade route [...] Life along a pathway is shaped by things, stories, rumors, and people passing through – by motion, or by flows, if you will. However, a pathway is neither just another word for flow. While shaped by motion, pathways are also conditioned by terrain, infrastructure and environmental factors like climate and weather.' Saxer, 'Pathways', p. 105.

16 Marsden, 'Actually', p. 30.

remarkable cultural diversity and understood it as highly fragmented. It is true that the India-China Corridor is a linguistic, cultural and religious shatter zone with only a few counterparts in the world, such as the Caucasus or New Guinea. The Corridor is home to hundreds of ethnic communities speaking dozens of languages belonging to a handful of language families. Many consider themselves to be Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, or Hindus, and many others observe local community religions. They do not share a single link language. In some of the sub-regions of the Corridor national languages (Chinese, Burmese, Bengali and Hindi) are relevant as link languages, whereas in other sub-regions communication is facilitated by specific Corridor languages such as Shan, Jinghpaw, Lushai and Arakanese, as well as creole or pidgin languages, notably Nagamese.

However, it would be a mistake to overplay the extreme ethnic and linguistic fragmentation when studying mobility and territorial power. When such fragmentation is emphasised, it is usually seen to be a result of the Corridor's craggy landscape and a historical absence of large, enduring, hegemonic states. Nevertheless, this appears not to have hampered mobility. As Cederlöf shows, there were multilingual traders and interpreters who provided services along the pathways. Moreover, webs of mobility were not ethnically exclusive and instead, as Ma and Møller show, they were and remain mostly highly multi-ethnic. The specific forms that these mobility-webs take today are historically specific.

What cultural fragmentation did achieve, however, was that it made the India-China Corridor very hard for outsiders to access and understand. They could observe people and goods entering into and emerging from it, but its inner workings remained largely inscrutable. When we follow British travellers' trails in the early nineteenth century, as Cederlöf does, reading their reports is like seeing pieces of scenery beyond which the travellers were unable to reach. Of course, their observations could be detailed and accurate, but they were fragmentary and frequently led to inaccurate conclusions. These British visitors listened to rumours and picked up impressions from conversations with people on the road. They followed these up with long internal discussions about what the information, silences, and absences might mean. The observations written into their reports and correspondence included events that the officers failed to understand. These open up a deeper understanding of interactions and social life along the pathways and in the basins, when read against internal administration, local genealogies and natural science data.

It should not surprise anyone that many outside observers imagined the Corridor and its inhabitants to be mysterious and outlandish. Stories about

tree-living creatures, complete nudity, human sacrifices, headhunting and fabulous natural riches circulated widely in China, India, and Burma alike. Echoes of these ideas still shape contemporary notions of the region, and there is a need to decolonise such perceptions. Significantly, they point to an important aspect in the study of mobility and territoriality: the production of ignorance. As Møller explains, ignorance is not just the absence of knowledge, or an effect of the limits of knowledge. It can also be deliberately produced by guarding knowledge against outsiders. He shows how Chinese jade traders do this by hiding the harsh realities of jade extraction in Myanmar behind a smokescreen of positive imagery about the beauty of jade and its cultural significance in Chinese history.¹⁷

People on the move, whether as migrants or people with itinerant livelihoods, often attract negative attention. Here, too, the control of information flows is highly relevant to mobility. States prefer a settled and taxable population, even targeting particular elusive groups as lawless, as in the 'criminal tribes' in British-administered territories in Asia. Rumours about migrants raping and stealing the belongings of honourable citizens can spread like wildfire. Labour migrants from Bangladesh arriving in Nagaland have found themselves in a squeeze between what Wouters describes as an escape from endemic poverty, devastating floods, and acute land shortages in Bangladesh. When settling in Nagaland, they find that the Naga political struggle for an ethnic homeland turns notions of Christian identity and ethnic purity against migrants. In 2015, the president of the Naga Students' Federation claimed that 'immigration from Bangladesh has become a serious threat to Naga society,' and a month later a furious mob attacked and lynched an evidently innocent Assamese man (whom they mistook for a Bangladeshi Muslim), accusing him of having raped a Naga girl.¹⁸

As new technologies become available, new research methods are developed to challenge the active production of ignorance. This is demonstrated in Than and May's chapter, which relies heavily on digital proximity to overcome physical barriers. It was impossible for Than to meet up with her Rohingya interlocutors whose mobility was severely constrained by state action. The Myanmar authorities isolated them from the general population by issuing separate identity cards and driving them into camps. This was a strategy that nurtured ignorance about their condition, made them invisible and voiceless, and strengthened what Than and May call 'mental borders.' By using digital connectivity, their Rohingya interlocutors were able to

17 Møller, chapter 8 in this volume.

18 Wouters, chapter 7 in this volume.

overcome their physical immobility and imposed invisibility. This enabled their ideas and concerns to escape the camp. In this way, hidden histories and unacknowledged experiences became visible.¹⁹

The fact that the India-China Corridor has been hard for outsiders to understand has resulted in scholars marginalising it in their work. More concerned with explaining how power, ideas and wealth radiate from 'centres' to 'peripheries,' they have often failed to acknowledge the powerful impact that this hub of connections has had on 'centres.' An exception is research into the large-scale impact of flows of opium and methamphetamine, produced in the eastern parts of the Corridor (dubbed the Golden Triangle) and supplied around the world. The impact of other Corridor flows – of industrial commodities, gemstones, fossil fuels, people and ideas – on 'centres' outside the Corridor is much less studied, and the same is true for power centres within the Corridor.

The India-China Corridor's marginalisation in scholarly imaginations has hampered absolutely essential debates and cooperation. Only very recently has a scholarly field begun to take shape in this world region. The obstacles to be overcome are considerable. Firstly, as in Than and May's work, we have seen that physical access is not always possible. For security reasons, states severely restrict free movement in parts of the Corridor where there are local revolts and border issues. Secondly, researchers may have only limited or selective access to historical source material in state archives. The archives may be closed, or the necessary permits may be hard to obtain. Thirdly, it is an obvious hurdle in such a multilingual region that individual researchers have limited language skills. This means that they cannot access information in many different languages unless through interpreters or translators. As a result, they are obliged to concentrate on sources that fit their linguistic profile. Thus, Ma gravitates towards Chinese, Cederlöf to English, and Than and May to Burmese. Fourthly, this is a new academic field. Novel conceptual tools for studying the Corridor, such as Southeast Asian Massif, Zomia, borderworld, multiple state space, and multistate margin, have only recently been developed and tested.²⁰ Each comes with its own discussions that overlap, but do not coincide, with the focus of this volume. Studying the Corridor requires a specific form of teamwork and the pooling of specific language skills. Developing expertise in handling the sources of information is especially important if we are to recognise biases and silences in the sources themselves as well as in their interpretation. Such expertise involves an

¹⁹ Than and May, chapter 9 in this volume.

²⁰ Shneiderman, 'Central Himalayas', pp. 289-312; Sadan, *Being and Becoming*; Smyer Yü, 'Trans-Himalayas', pp. 8-41.

understanding that documents which are kept in colonial archives do not simply reflect imperial mind-sets. On the contrary, many archival records are, in fact, letters and reports produced by Burmese, Shan, Assamese, and other non-Europeans. Imperial rulers depended on access to vernacular documents and intelligence, which explains why many such documents are now located in what tend to be called 'colonial archives.' It would be a huge mistake to discard these vernacular or subaltern voices as representing 'colonial bias.'

Research cooperation is essential to reconnect the study of the India-China Corridor. It can break down barriers, repair fragmentation and overcome the state-centred perspectives that have long impeded and distorted research. It can also give an impetus to decolonising, departitioning and demarginalising studies of this large and neglected region. It is our hope that this volume can contribute to this endeavour.

Organisation of the book

This volume consists of three Parts. *Part One: Prologue* contains David Ludden's wide-ranging essay on ways to reconceptualise the spatial history of Asia. It can be read as a thought-provoking framing of the issues involved in rethinking mobility and friction.²¹ *Part Two: A Long View* consists of four chapters by Jianxiong Ma, Gunnell Cederlöf, Joy Pachuau and Arupjyoti Saikia. Each focuses on historical flows and frictions that manifested themselves in a particular location during a well-defined period. Together, these chapters suggest new ways of studying Corridor mobilities across several centuries. The volume concludes with *Part Three: Mobilities Today*. Made up of three chapters by Jelle Wouters, Henrik Kloppenborg Møller and Tharaphi Than and Htoo May, it considers the interplay of flow and friction in three forms of contemporary mobility in the Corridor – of people, commodities and identities – and their powerful effects on individuals and communities.

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21 See also Ludden, 'India's Spatial History', pp. 23-37.

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