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

Tina Harris\*

### Introduction: Fixing and Moving

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

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

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

\* I would like to thank Erik de Maaker and the participants at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) Moving Matters Seminar on February 28, 2013.

**Figure 6.1 “Diverse Merchandise” – a 1947 advertisement from the Tibet Mirror**



still is – very much part of regional and international economic networks. What struck me by these advertisements, however, was how traders living in Himalayan borderlands organized the movement of these items across borders during particularly turbulent geopolitical times, and what this can tell us about what it means to ‘neighbour’ China in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As Juan Zhang and Martin Saxer describe in the introduction to this volume, neighbouring denotes skilled efforts to negotiate one’s own position in relation to others, and to create connections across distance. Along these lines, neighbouring in the Himalayan borderlands builds on the practical, situational knowledge of traders’ access to roads, vehicles, and land, and, at times, requires improvisation and cunning strategies.

In this chapter, I argue that while state-driven schemes of opening up borders or shutting off routes are imposed from above, traders go about their business in ways that both skirt and exploit these very schemes, and it is here that local level cross-border neighbouring processes are sustained. Connections are made across distance via relationships between things that move and things that stay put; that is, the relationships between the goods, vehicles, and the people that move across these borders, and the supposedly fixed structures or apparatuses – roads, land, and rail – that allow them to move in the first place. In the effort of states to shut their

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Design: UvA-Kaartenmakers

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

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

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

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

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

The ‘Chief Steward’, the sole Commissioner on the part of the Tibetan Government for reporting on the frontier matter, ‘made the important statement that the Tibetans did not consider themselves bound by the Convention with China, as they were not a party to it. He reported further, that the Tibetans had prevented the formation of a mart by building a wall across the valley on the farther side of Yatung, by efficiently guarding this and by prohibiting their traders from passing through. Mr. Korb, a wool merchant from Bengal, had come to Yatung to purchase wool from some of his correspondents on the Tibetan side, who had invited him thither; but the Tibetans prevented his correspondents from coming to do business with him. (Younghusband 1971 [1910])

The British trade agencies doubled as administrative units; David MacDonal, a trade officer in Tibet for nearly twenty years, wrote of his duties in Yatung, which ‘consisted of administering the Trade Mart, caring for the interests of British subjects trading in Tibet, and watching and forwarding



reports on the political situation [vis-à-vis China] to the Government of India (MacDonald 1999 [1930]: 52-53) Although somewhat cut off from British strategic headquarters in England and India, the British trade agencies (which became Indian trade agencies in 1947 and formally continued with Chinese control over communication operations in 1954) operated in Tibet until the Sino-Indian border war in 1962 and the closing-off of all border passes (McKay 1997). Thus, all of these actual constructions as well as the investment in these fixed constructions – the establishment of trade agencies, boundaries, and new roads – were intended to facilitate unimpeded ‘free trade’ for the British while restricting the movement of existing traders in the region. Of course, by building their own wall against that of the British encroachment into their territory, the Tibetan traders made certain that their control over the everyday economic life of the borderlands between Sikkim and Tibet was made known. And yet both the British and the Tibetans became stakeholders in what was more or less a similar goal – trying to move their commodities through the land in order to sell them to neighbouring buyers, employing strategies to circumvent obstacles that prevented smooth trade.

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

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

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

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

## Vehicles: Technologies of Moving Goods Across Borders

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Land: Speculation and Unevenness

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

To further exemplify the differences between individual experiences of living in this area with a newly-opened border, the unlimited 'free trade' promised by both the Chinese and Indian governments was nowhere to be found, at least on the Indian side in 2006. When Nathula was reopened for trade on July 6<sup>th</sup>, those on the Indian side found that the wire fences (first erected after the border was initially shut in 1962) were replaced by twenty-meter stone walls. Traders had to cross seven security checkpoints from Gangtok to the border, and there were long bureaucratic delays in obtaining the proper import-export codes, as well as strict restrictions on

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

