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Processual Histories, Commodity Chains, and the Yak Tail Trade

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Cross-border commodities

Processual histories, commodity chains, and the yak tail trade

Tina Harris

Introduction

A vendor sells a brocade coat lined with sheep wool along the Barkhor, the main pilgrimage route and marketplace in Lhasa, Tibet. The silky purple outer layer, with its pattern of Buddhist endless knots and brocade trim, is apparently made in a small factory in Varanasi, India, brought by trucks through India, Nepal, and up to Lhasa. The wool lining is likely from a sheep located in the Changtang in central Tibet. The silver-plated buttons are made in Kathmandu and delivered by women who cross the Chinese border once every few months for trading purposes. The vendor himself is Tibetan, born in the border town of Dram, who spent much of his life shuttling goods like cheap perfume from Nepal. What do we learn from commodity journeys like this, journeys that take place along multiple paths in and across the borderlands of Asia? Which objects become more (or less) important during which periods in history, and why? What kinds of items travel more easily over borders than others? Who controls the flow of commodities in borderland areas, and under what conditions might this control be overturned? This chapter focuses on a rich set of studies that investigate the intersections between mobility, commodities, and borders in Asia by asking similar kinds of questions. It argues that commodity-level research is ideally placed to draw out broad, dynamic themes that can expand the study of borders and borderland processes in Asia, themes such as state and territory formation, changing consumption meanings and values, and the direction of global capital.

In the social sciences and humanities, studies of commodities have been characterized by several different theoretical lines; however, this chapter will highlight two threads that are particularly useful in the study of Asian borderlands. First, 'processual histories' such as Fernand Braudel's three-volume *Civilisation and Capitalism* (1979) and Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* (1982) focus on the labour and people involved in the paths of objects and resources in order to provide a fuller picture of the large-scale, transnational flows of goods that are crucial to the making of states and territories over a *longue durée* history. The study of commodities—especially in Asian borderland regions where diverse groups struggle to maintain control over states and territories that solidify and loosen over the course of time—necessarily needs to be embedded in a wider context of global historical and geopolitical change.

Second, although there are numerous excellent studies of the transformation of material culture in Asia such as the marketization of 'ethnic' crafts in Thailand (Cohen 2000), the relationship of individual lives to wearing a sari (Banerjee and Miller 2003), and even the Intel anthropologist Genevieve Bell's study of changing mobile phone use (Bell 2006), the focus of this chapter is on the production and consequences of the mobility—and immobility, in many cases—of goods across borders. Thus, the chapter focuses on scholarship influenced by the notion of the 'commodity chain' (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994), as well as the idea of creating a 'cultural biography' of an item (Appadurai 1986), where both approaches emphasize the movement of commodities and their transformation as they pass through the hands of diverse groups, especially in the so-called 'margins' of states. While tracing the production, exchange, and consumption of an object across borders is methodologically difficult (Where does one begin? Which branches of exchange do you follow?), it works well as a heuristic tool for addressing *processes*, both the time period and the spatial paths that an object traverses. Exploring the commodity in borderlands is less about what kind of object it is, but what meanings are given to it at specific moments in its 'life' as it travels (Appadurai 1986: 13).

This chapter is organized in three main parts. First, it outlines why some processual histories or 'process geographies' have been useful for informing more contemporary studies of commodities in Asian borderlands. Second, it looks at a small selection of the scholarship on specific commodities in Asian borderlands, emphasizing three main themes that emerge: how focusing on flows of commodities in regions that are often considered 'remote' can also highlight state regulatory mechanisms; how various groups come to have profoundly differential access and control over certain commodities; and how the very idea of 'Asian borderlands' itself might be challenged through studies of the cross-border movement of commodities. Finally, in order to draw out these themes in more detail, the chapter concludes with a brief consideration of one specific commodity: the Himalayan yak tail.

'Processual' histories and geographies

Many of the studies of the movement of commodities across borderlands have been informed by comparative, *longue durée* histories of production, distribution, and exchange across the globe. It is worth giving a nod to these studies of interrelated political, economic, and social processes for their overarching view of how commodities move across time and space from production to exchange to consumption. One prominent example is Fernand Braudel's extended documentation of capitalism and trade, emphasizing the production and circulation of goods as they travelled through the hands of merchants and middlemen from the 15th to the 18th centuries (Braudel 1979). Paying close attention to the 'material life' and livelihoods of people involved in the trade of goods such as calico from India to France reveals hierarchies and dependencies that are produced amongst merchants, distributors, and officials in everyday exchange, where the 'upper stories can't exist without the lower stories' (Braudel 1979: 22). Traces of this *longue durée* approach are clear in Eric Tagliacozzo's work on the illicit flow of narcotics and humans across maritime Southeast Asia, for instance (Tagliacozzo 2005).

The sharp critique of the mid-20th century disciplinary split in the social sciences separating social, political, and economic as autonomous spheres of study has also proven crucial for many scholars of commodities, who work with the understanding that these processes are inextricably intertwined. Immanuel Wallerstein's 'world systems' idea was one of these critical frameworks, where the world economy is seen as made up of two interdependent regions: core and periphery, both of which are geographically and culturally different, one focusing on labour-intensive production, and the other on capital-intensive production (Wallerstein 2000). However, from

the perspective of studies in and across Asian borderlands, this approach has been highly criticized for being too dependent on the notion that a marginalized, powerless 'periphery' has less agency than the more powerful regions in the 'core' parts of the world (Wolf 1982; Walker 1999). Thus, critiquing the idea of border regions as 'traditional' and 'static' has been extremely important to scholars who work on commodities in these regions. In particular, drawing out the histories of commodities 'from below' demonstrate that borderland populations were dynamically—and often violently—drawn into commodity production (such as rubber, palm oil, and sugar) to supply people in power for territorial expansion and capitalist accumulation (Wolf 1982: 352–353).

Eric Wolf's description of the movement of rice across South and Southeast Asia is one case in point. When Britain colonized Burma in 1855, nearly all of the Burmese rice began to be exported to British colonies. Yet the crop was not meant for the British people living there (their consumption habits did not include much rice), but instead for sustaining the huge numbers of Indians labouring on British tea and rubber plantations in Ceylon and Malaya, the sugar plantations of the West Indies, and in India itself. Bringing these 'marginal' and mostly non-Western commodity stories to the forefront, according to Wolf, means that 'both the people who claim history as their own and the people to whom history has been denied emerge as participants in the same historical trajectory' (Wolf 1982: 23). By tracing the (often violent) acquisition of raw materials, the processing of goods, and their consumption across multiple territories, these 'process geographies' (or processual histories as they have been called) necessarily shift the focus away from national centres or state boundaries to the diverse humans involved in the creating of, the transport of, and the struggle over goods and resources (Appadurai 2000: 7; van Schendel 2002). What is especially significant for this chapter is that these processes more often than not occur within and across so-called 'remote' locations in the borderlands of states and territories. When the mundane commodity and its producers, handlers, and consumers take centre stage, this approach can simultaneously pay attention to local dynamics expressed at the human level as well as more macro-level changes in geopolitics, as the commodity bumps up against state-based restrictions such as border closures. And yet these stories are not simply tales of dichotomous top-down state regulations versus bottom-up resistance or resilience. One of the other common approaches is to look at these very stories themselves through the commodity biography approach.

Commodities in Asia and in Asian borderlands

The 'mystical character of the commodity', as Karl Marx has put it, often obscures the social relations and labour that generate its production and exchange (Marx 1857: 164). The commodity chain approach, then, is one way to examine the complex 'network of labour and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity' (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994: 1). Critical versions of this approach have attempted to move beyond fixed production and consumption nodes in the commodity chain as well as to expose the deeper inequalities and unevenness produced by such chains (Hartwick 1998; Cook et al. 2004). Ted Bestor's work on the global sushi supply chain, for example, follows fishermen off the coasts of Maine and Spain, to auctions at the Tsukiji fish market in central Tokyo, to the discourse and effects of this chain on global tuna sustainability (Bestor 2001, 2004). Focusing on a specific commodity or set of commodities often requires a multi-sited methodological approach, which is particularly useful for scholars working across multiple Asian border regions (Marcus 1995). But commodities do not necessarily flow easily across such borders; they are stopped, they are taken away, they are restricted, and their direction of movement may very well be reversed. At other moments, they are waved through,

concealed, disguised as other kinds of commodities, or welcomed. In-depth studies of commodities across borders can help illuminate the wider political, social, and economic contexts that lead up to these very moments. This section will therefore highlight selected narratives of specific commodities from several border regions in Asia, emphasizing three overarching themes that emerge from the literature: how looking closely at the paths of commodities demonstrate that borderlands are *not* peripheral and powerless; how the study of commodities reveal the ways that diverse groups have differential access and control over such goods; and how the very idea of 'Asian borderlands' itself might be challenged through studies of the cross-border movement of commodities.

Lying in the margins of states, borderlands are often represented as peripheral and beholden to the power of those who rule from the centres. On the contrary, borderland scholars have shown that people who move commodities across borders intersect daily with the state or state power, as well as contribute to the hardening of these very borders (Walker 1999: 7). For instance, Andrew Walker's work on cross-river boat operators in the economic quadrangle of Laos, Burma, China, and Thailand demonstrates that although the livelihoods of people in the 'margins' 'have mobility at the heart of their identity' they have 'no problems with participating in the maintenance of borders' (Walker 1999: 8). It is indeed common to depict borderlands as lawless frontiers, but when commodities move across border areas, this very movement often presents a contradiction: as trading becomes more liberalized, opportunities for regulation flourish (Walker 1999: 7). States perform a balancing act where they must 'pursue their neoliberal dream of a borderless economy and at the same time barricade their borders' (Abraham and van Schendel 2005: 23). Wen-chin Chang has written on similar processes in the jade trade from Burma to Thailand during the 20th-century period when Burma declared border trade illegal. She shows that instead of being a 'passive geographical margin' it is precisely because of restrictions on the flow of commodities that this borderland becomes a 'scene of intense interactions' and that pragmatic reasons for making profits overshadow the cultural meanings of jade (Baud and van Schendel 1997: 216; Chang 2014).

There is a second thematic argument that stems from much of the literature on the movement of specific commodities across Asian borderlands. Such studies reveal the tensions between various stakeholders vying for power in the borderlands and their profoundly differential access to control over territory and goods. For instance, Laura Schoenberger and Sarah Turner's research has shown that Lao cross-border traders sell small volumes of goods such as ribbons, skirts, cardamom, and sandals precisely because they gain a more concentrated minority market, putting them at an advantage vis-à-vis their Kinh competitors in the same region (Schoenberger and Turner 2008). On the other hand, Rune Steenberg shows that the trade in one kind of rubber sandal in two cross-border locations in Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang is based on long-term community building efforts between people from the same town and along the nodes of the sandal supply chain (Steenberg 2014: 11–12). While they are technically each other's main competitors, they must share knowledge about infrastructure, prices, and often share living spaces as well. Finally, Malini Sur has explored how both rice cultivators and the military raided each others' harvests in order to survive in the India–East Pakistan borderlands before 1971, illustrating how the rice itself became central to the production of Indo-Bangladesh borders that are still contested today (Sur 2016). Research on specific commodity flows across Asian borderlands is therefore fruitful for showing not only how ethnic groups vie for recognition vis-à-vis states, but also vis-à-vis each other at crucial historical moments.

Finally, the last thematic point is that cultural biographies of commodities across Asian borders are not always about Asian borders. As mentioned above, tracing a commodity across distance is often methodologically difficult, and necessarily involves far-flung networks that may have

distribution centres in Brazil and manufacturing hubs in Indonesia. Several works on the movement of commodities in Asia, particularly those that investigate more flexible or neoliberal accumulation strategies, explore those who are in nodes or hubs of chains that are scattered around the world. One example is Ted Bestor's work on the sushi chain (mentioned earlier), and another is Anna Tsing's collaborative research on the extraction of value in the high-value matsutake mushroom trade, from the wealthy mushroom buyers in Japan, to Lao, Hmong, and Cambodian mushroom harvesters in the Pacific Northwest of North America (Tsing 2015). In each of these cases, it is clear that the approach to following specific commodity histories involves expanding or questioning what the 'Asian borderland' actually is. As the Southeast Asian refugees use the jungle skills they learned while surviving in war-torn homelands to successfully pick profitable mushrooms while reminiscing about village life, who is to say that the idea of an Asian borderland cannot also be produced in the forests of Oregon?

The yak tail: a borderland story

A 2013 article in *Vanity Fair* magazine titled 'Creating *The Hobbit*'s Oscar-Nominated Yak Beards' discusses hair-and-makeup designer Peter King's need to procure up to 80 kilos of yak hair, ideal for making dwarves' thick, flowing beards in the fantasy film (Hanel 2013). When imagining commodities that are clearly linked to global demand and geopolitical change, the yak tail—unlike sugar, salt, or timber—is not usually on the top of this list. But in answering the question of how studies of cross-border commodities can help us to understand changing socio-economic dynamics in Asia and beyond, the journey of a yak tail can be a fruitful case study of how both its origin and use are linked to the production and negotiation of Asian borders. Using the 'commodity biography' framework mentioned in the sections above, the narrative below investigates these issues through three 'windows': the yak tail's changing uses and meanings, its role and representation in 20th century geopolitics, and how its movement is affected by border closings and re-openings.

The yak—a shaggy haired, fairly docile bovid—lives in high altitude areas along the Himalayas and the Central Asian plateau. It is commonly used in a number of ways: as a pack animal, for meat, for dung for fuel, and for milk (from the female yak, the 'bri'). In Edward Schafer's study of Tang dynasty trade and tributary items, the tails of yaks have been traded across Asia as Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu ritual implements, as fly whisks, and as decorations for hats of nobility since the 8th century (Schafer 1985: 74). The tails are sturdy, waterproof, and easy to curl, which also made them—particularly the white tails—ideal for costume wigs and beards in Chinese dance and opera performances. In the mid-20th century, the yak tail was one of the main items in the *Tibet Mirror* newspaper, which featured the commodity prices of various goods that were traded along the route linking Lhasa, Tibet with Kalimpong, and India. Wool, animal skins, musk, and yak tails all made their way down the Himalayas into India, and further down to the port of Calcutta for their eventual trade to Europe and North America. It is unclear exactly when yak tails began to be exported to the United States, but sometime during the late 1940s, reports of the desirability of expensive yak-tail beards used for Santa Claus costumes began to emerge, as Santa Clauses became more common in malls and shopping centres in North America during the post-World War II commoditization boom (Harris 2014).

While sales of Santa Claus costumes boomed in North America, political tensions with China continued to intensify. Soon after the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered eastern Tibet in 1950, Tibet came under the control of the Chinese state. The US embargo on goods from China meant that wool and yak tails from Tibet (i.e. China) would be stopped

from leaving India. Yak tails began piling up in warehouses in Tibet and India, prevented from crossing over the border and beyond to North America. In response, the already-sky high prices of this luxury commodity skyrocketed. Here, the humble yak tail begins to be implicated in geopolitical marketing manoeuvres: in order to continue the profitable trade with wig retailers and suppliers in the United States, Kalimpong-based traders and sellers began to say that the yak tails—and by extension the yak—were not from Tibet (read: China) at all, but were mixed with yak hair from other places in the surrounding Asian borderlands: Bhutan, India, and even Russia. It is at this point that the borders in this region come into sharper focus. Even though the Tibetan yak do not necessarily follow national boundaries and could very well have mixed with Bhutanese yak, the fact that the nationality of the yak tails must now be declared in order to generate potential profits across borders paradoxically dovetails with the hardening of nation state borders.

Our borderland yak tail story is not yet over. In 1962, the Sino-Indian War resulted in the closing of all borders between the two countries, and the commodities that once travelled along the Lhasa-Kalimpong route trickled to a halt. But in 2006, over 40 years later, the Nathu-la mountain pass along the old Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route was re-opened in order to increase trade between China and India, during a time when both countries were pushing rapid development agendas in their hinterlands. The opening of borders is often simultaneously a hardening of borders, bringing with it increased fences, walls, gates, security, and limitations of what can and cannot be brought across. With Nathu-la, the yak tail was one out of only 15 items that were allowed by the Indian government for fear of Chinese goods 'flooding' the weaker market on the other side. Not a hugely lucrative commodity by any means at this point, yak tails are instead displayed in the border markets as 'ethnic souvenirs' from Tibet for foreign and Chinese tourists. Other, more profitable items go across illicitly, such as white goods that are brought as 'gifts' for cross-border friends and family, blurring the commodity-versus-gift distinction so prominent in early social science work on material culture. This leads to a hierarchy of items that can cross borders: 'women's goods' such as kitchenware or 'shopping' are seen as less important, for instance, but at the same time can often travel more quickly across border crossings (Konstantinov 1996; Harris 2013; Sur 2014). What commodity biographies across Asia also do is to situate 'Asia' in a more complex arena of transnational networks and nodes. To what extent is a hobbit's beard part of an Asian borderland story or part of a more global story?

Conclusions

Recently, there have been numerous examples of the increased infrastructural connections between China and the rest of its Asian borders, such as reports of seven border openings between Arunachal Pradesh and Tibet, and new civilian airports in western Tibet, Sikkim, and southwestern Yunnan. Through the implementation of the Chinese-led 'One Belt One Road' maritime and overland infrastructure network throughout Asia, the nostalgic revival of the 'ancient Silk Road' or the Tea-Horse Road features strongly in the representation of how commodities will travel across Asia in the future. There is indeed a need for better infrastructure in many margins of states where local roads and routes are liable to be washed out due to landslides or poor maintenance, but for whom will these new infrastructural changes be meant for? Do border openings increase the power of some groups while creating closings for others? Do these new road connections mean that certain goods will saturate the market, and what consequences will this have? There is a tendency to treat the study of goods and objects as static 'material culture', isolated from contemporary geopolitics. But tracing the movement of specific

commodities across Asian borderlands allows for multiple lenses onto where and when they can get across, why they may be halted or banned, and where they may very well go next. Far from the celebratory fanfare of globalization ushering in a unified 'borderless' world, borders are brought into even sharper focus from the perspective of the comparative-historical commodity biography in most of the studies mentioned here.

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