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Cross-border commodities
Processual histories, commodity chains, and the yak tail trade

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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 Srinapatna, 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 the vendor himself, a 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 objects 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 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 borders have been informed by comparative, longue durée histories of production, distribution, and consumption 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 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.
the perspective of studies in and across Asian borderlands, this approach has been highly criti-
cized 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 a '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 dynam-
ically—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

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 Malaysia, the sugar plan-
tations 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,
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 borders 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 com-
mon 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 commod-
ity 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
version of this approach have attempted to move beyond fixed production and consumption
modes in the commodity chain as well as to expose the deeper inequalities and unevenness pro-
duced by such chains (Hartwick 1998; Cook et al. 2004). Ted Bestor's work on the global unil
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 sus-
tainability (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 commod-
ities across borders can help illuminate the intricate 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 demonstrates 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 interact 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 flor-
ish (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
Schen德尔 2003: 23). Wen-chin Chung has written on similar processes in the jade trade from
Barma 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 restric-
tions on the flow of commodities that this borderland became a 'source 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 vari-
ious stakeholders vying for power in the borderlands and their profusely 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, car-
damom, 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 Stenbergs shows that the trade in one kind of rubber
sandals in two cross-border locations in Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang is based on long-term com-
munity building efforts between people from the same town and along the nodes of the sandal
supply chain (Stenbergs 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 tended 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

Cross-border commodities

108

109
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 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

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 design expert Peter King’s need to procure up to 80 kilos of yak hair, ideal for making dwarf’s 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 when contextualized in the question of how studies of cross-border commodities can help us to understand changing socioeconomic 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, in relation 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 plains. 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 ‘bn’). 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 cut, 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 Tibetan Mirror newspaper, which featured the commodity prices of various goods that were traded along the route linking Lhasa, Tibet, with Kham 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 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

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 infrastructural connections 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

Cross-border commodities 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. As a 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 1982, 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 (Kostantinov 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?
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.

References


