An Experiment in New Nepali Studies: Decolonisation, Transculturation, and Everyday Life Between (and Beyond) Nepal and China

Zezhou YANG

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Department of South Asia
School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics
SOAS, University of London

Thesis Abstract

This thesis explores the potential contours of new academic bodies of Nepali Studies, and in doing so, questions for whom these bodies of knowledge might be reshaped. It proposes that the current academic discourse of Nepali Studies, with its predominantly Western-centric, nation-state-affiliated characteristics, often fails to serve the diverse needs of local actors. These actors frequently embody nuanced forms of cross-border engagement, entangled in various power geometries, and grounded in everyday contexts.

In this thesis, I argue for a more dynamic and inclusive Nepali Studies that produces nuanced, place-specific knowledge derived from the lived experiences of various trans-regional actors. It asserts the importance of a simultaneous decolonising reflection on the intersection of coloniality, knowledge production, and power in Asian contexts.

The contentious presence of China in Nepal's history, particularly in the recent decade, provides a robust case study. This thesis delves into empirical and concrete instances of Nepal-China engagement, starting by examining the pre-modern trans-Himalayan complexity of Nepal-related knowledge. It scrutinises how such trans-local knowledge has been negated, reshaped, and integrated into the dominant colonial knowledge framework since the early 20th century. With the matrix of coloniality in knowledge production as its backdrop, the thesis then moves to the contemporary era. It investigates how Nepal is portrayed in modern trans-Himalayan cultural artefacts, such as travelogues and Vlogs, seen as inventive modalities of knowledge dissemination that can often enable marginalised actors to gain mobility within the globalised world. This thesis also addresses spatial aspects of contact, exploring several transnational spaces and how they influence various transnational power dynamics in everyday contexts. It pays particular attention to emerging Trans-Himalayan mobility patterns and tactics used by various actors to navigate turbulent times. By examining concrete instances of engagement between Nepal and China, I adopt a public, participatory, and collaborative stance.

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Chapter One Introduction

A Detention Room: An Alternative Direct Interaction between Nepal and China

On the 12th of October, 2019, I found myself in a detention room at the Singh Durbar Metropolitan Police Station in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal. The cramped space was shared by several other Chinese citizens and two, presumably, ethnically Tibetan individuals whose citizenship was not confirmed to me. This day marked the state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Nepal, an event that the Nepali government treated with extreme priority. Preparations such as cleaning the city's main avenues had begun at least half a month prior to his arrival. Furthermore, the urban landscapes of several major roads in Kathmandu were adorned with portraits of both states' presidents and slogans celebrating "*Sarvocca śikhara sagaramāthā jastdai uccā nēpāla-cīna mitratā*"[1]. The Nepali government also paid considerable attention to Xi's security, taking some measures that were seen as controversial. It was reported (Dhungana, 2019) that local police had begun monitoring Kathmandu's Tibetan communities a week earlier. Our presence in the detention room, although never explicitly explained, may have been due to these security concerns. I was attempting to record some potentially meaningful moments for my fieldwork when I was intercepted by a group of armed police officers at the junction of Kupondole Road and Tripura Road. After failing to comply with their orders, I was placed in a police jeep, where two other Chinese individuals were already seated, and transported to the police station.

The Chinese nationals I conversed with in the detention room had similar experiences. They were also brought to the police station from the streets. None of us were officially informed of the exact reason for our detention. However, without any verified information, we had a sense of why we were in the detention room. We were initially told that we would be released at 6 pm, but it was not until 10 pm that we were 'bailed out' from the police station, after our passports and visas had been thoroughly examined.

The time spent in detention was not unbearable, but rather communicative. After recovering from the initial shock and anxiety, the individuals in the room began to socialise. The diverse backgrounds and positions of the people in Nepal[2] provided many interesting stories for

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[1] The English translation adds the Chinese name of the peak, "Nepal-China friendship is as tall as the highest peak, Mount Sagarmatha/Qomolangma" (my fieldwork journals, 2019).

[2] The individuals in the detention room that day comprised a diverse group: a Chinese mountaineer, staff from a Chinese noodle restaurant in Thamel, expatriates dispatched to Kathmandu by a Chinese infrastructure company, a hostel manager, and his assistant, who happened to be the only female in the room.

entertainment. Interestingly, the detention room offered an opportunity for people's originally scattered trajectories to temporarily intersect. The spatial confinement sparked curiosity about each other's stories. Those who had been in Nepal for a longer time were eager to share a 'true' Nepal with others, based on their everyday experiences and observations. After several exchanges about people's everyday lives and imaginations, a sketch of the 'authentic' image of Nepal was formed within the detention room. It portrayed Nepal as a blend of underdevelopment, lack of modernity, eroticism, and exoticism.

During my fieldwork and thesis writing, I found myself 'returning' to that small detention room time and again. This was not due to the unfair treatment I received there, but rather because I identified two discrepancies and one opportunity that day, which, remarkably, were highly relevant to the underlying themes of my thesis.

The first discrepancy I noticed is the contrast between the prominent Chinese presence in Nepal and the dominance of Western knowledge in the region. In the detention room that day, while people extensively discussed their empirical everyday experiences in Nepal, the framework they used to inquire, organise, and interpret these everyday encounters—to make sense of Nepal—was largely perceived to be deeply rooted in European colonialism, Orientalist schemas, Western norms of development and modernity, and neoliberal globalisation. This suggests a lack of knowledge about Nepal that arises from direct interactions between local actors, which have dramatically increased in recent years. In other words, although empirical experiences of direct interactions between Nepal and China have grown and diversified recently, they have not necessarily been explicitly systematised as useful and specifically targeted knowledge that addresses particular issues and experiences circulating between (and beyond) Nepal and China. One consequence—and cause—of this deficiency is the absence of a type of New Nepali Studies, including theoretical frameworks and empirical methodologies, that aims to serve the aforementioned purposes.

Area Studies has been defined in a mutable fashion and differently across various contexts. Some prevalent and commonly accepted definitions of Area Studies underscore its role in learning, analysing, and interpreting foreign cultures and social dynamics that are, in most cases, located outside the geographic and cultural boundaries of Europe and the West. Its development (and decline) is not only financially and geopolitically supported by Western colonial expansion in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, Cold War-era USA-led intelligence

competitions, and post-9/11 security concerns, but more fundamentally, it is intertwined with modern European concepts of race, nation, and culture, which are often defined and confined by static geographic borders (Goss and Wesley-Smith, 2010; Harootunian and Miyoshi, 2002; Ludden, 2000; Niblock, 2020; Szanton, 2004). Since the 1990s, critiques, defences, and improvements revolving around this model of Area Studies have guided the trend in relevant academia (Agnew, 1999; Amako, 2017; Franzinetti, 2015; Huat et al., 2019; Jackson, 2019; Khalidi, 1998; Milutinovic, 2019; Rutland, 2021; Sidaway, 2013). However, it seems that the ongoing debates rarely extend to Nepali Studies, at least not to the part involving Chinese actors. As I will demonstrate in later parts of this thesis (also hinted above), the knowledge of Nepal that guides various forms of Nepal-China interactions in modern history and at present is largely based on non-locally rooted languages and norms. While it is clear that the development of Area Studies is closely related to state-sponsored schemes and programs, I question why China's increasingly prominent presence in Nepal has not yet produced the required knowledge of Nepal. And if such a type of Nepali Studies is possible, what might it look like?

To clarify, I am not suggesting that efforts to assert the power of producing Nepal-specific knowledge have not occurred as part of interactions between Nepal and China. Quite the contrary, as readers will discover in later chapters, various actors from both states have paid significant attention to such power since as early as the 1910s as part of decolonial experiments. However, the extent to which their decolonial agency could contribute to decolonisation remains an open question. The issues of agency are not only related to the asymmetrical West/local power dynamics in Nepali Studies, but also point to another type of power asymmetry at a more grounded level. This is the second discrepancy I observed in the detention room: the one between the states' homogeneous 'high' knowledge of Nepal and various ordinary people's 'low' knowledge of the land. Here, the comparison of high and low does not carry any connotation of superiority or inferiority. The comparison merely suggests the different power sources that shape and maintain the knowledge, and the different fields in which various knowledge resides.

As I will suggest later, throughout history, especially after the 1950s, the power of knowledge production has been exclusive to different political administrations and their official scholars in both countries. One reason for this is that the primary actors of interaction between the two states used to be official agents. However, as suggested by the diverse composition of the detention room's members, an unprecedented number of ordinary agents with various

motivations, backgrounds, and capital have been involved in the process, and their agency may not align with the states. Even the agency of different individuals varies to a certain extent. However, I am disheartened that the current Nepali Studies between Nepal and China fail to address their bodies, voices, and experiences. How might the traditional model of Nepali Studies encounter the challenges and opportunities presented by these 'new' agents? How might a study that intends to homogeneously define a people, culture, and society with incommensurable traits within fixed boundaries respond to variety, mundaneness, and border-crossing mobility?

As far as I am concerned, the current state of Nepali Studies between Nepal and China fail to adequately answer these questions. As many scholars criticise the discipline of Area Studies, it reflects and enhances the colonial and imperial knowledge framework of and in the Himalayan area, whereby local languages and materials only serve as supplements. To some extent, it also reflects and endorses the contemporary geopolitical asymmetry as China is becoming a regional superpower. Furthermore, it would not be entirely unfair to criticise current Nepali Studies between Nepal and China as being overly empirical, resembling political rhetoric more than critical academic theorisation. What is more, its closed-end geographically bounded characteristic that emphasises the search for a uniform Nepali society and culture, to some extent, ignores the changes emerging during globalisation.

However, I would argue that despite all the drawbacks, Nepali Studies as it currently stands does not face an inevitable demise. In addition to exposing the problematic aspects of the current Nepali Studies between Nepal and China, my observations in the detention room that day also provided me with inspiration. This inspiration lies precisely in the elements that the drawbacks ignore: a variety of agents, their embeddedness in mundane everyday contexts, frequent mobility, and most importantly, their tactical worlding against various forms of dominant powers. The exchange of ideas among people in the detention room is important and meaningful, no matter how mundane or 'incorrect' their words may seem. They were not merely copying and pasting sorts of information to each other, but rather, consciously and unconsciously, making sense of the world around them and affirming their position in the world and relations with other individuals. In other words, their interactions, questions, answers, sharing, showing off, repeating, and doubting various information and imagination in the detention room are world-making. All that is required from us is an epistemological shift to recognising, acknowledging, and appreciating the agency, subjectivity, and credibility in

knowledge production of conventionally marginalized agents (i.e., local states, institutions, ordinary people), as insightfully advocated by (Houben et al., 2020: 56)

> "the aim of finding relational spatiotemporal outcomes instead of making static, singular and generalized claims of truth. The main subject matter, focusing on processes of world-making within a perspectival time-space constellation called 'area', puts human agency and positionality at the center of the scientific effort. Its theoretical basis … adopts kaleidoscopic dialectic as the principle of knowledge generation in the format of comparativity. Its methods consist of no mere eclectic triangulation of disciplinary methodologies but are based upon situational analysis."

On the one hand, the detention room is unique because it was organised and sustained by the conditions of a particular moment. On the other hand, it merely represents an example of world-making contemporary interactions between Nepal and China in mundane contexts. Every moment of every day, similar contact between Nepal and China is happening. While exposing the shortcomings of some extant knowledge frameworks, they also offer us unprecedented new materials and momentum for theoretical reconstruction.

Stemming from a discomfort with the mismatch between the extant static theoretical (and methodological) framework of Nepali Studies and the dynamic empirical on-ground contact experience between Nepal and China, and inspired by various individual agents' area (world)-making practices, experiences, movements, and creative products in specific contexts, this thesis undertakes *the overarching task of remapping Nepali Studies*. This is an experiment to reconsider Area Studies, knowledge production, decolonisation, and transculturation. By offering a comparative case from Nepal and Nepali Studies, it *argues that the decolonisation of Area Studies—a necessary but complex process for revitalising the discipline—will require the production of new, nuanced, place-specific knowledge that is grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of various regional actors*. This undertaking—organically prioritising conventionally marginalised local knowledge and experiences into the system—will be lengthy and multifaceted, but it is essential for liberating more ignored, even oppressed, heterogeneous forces to area-making projects.

This argument necessitates a reorientation of focus. Instead of concentrating on the privileged relationships between world regions, nation-states, and global centres of political and economic power, we should rather turn our attention towards areas characterised by connectivity, ambiguity, and transformability, as well as the dynamics of regional power. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge the processual nature of these areas, understanding that their borders are not fixed or stable, but artificial constructs, subject to change and shaped by historical events. This reorientation further requires a theoretical toolkit capable of

> "investigat[ing] the multiple ways in which difference is negotiated within contacts and encounters, through selective appropriation, mediation, translation, rehistoricizing and rereading of signs, alternatively through non-communication, rejection or resistance—or through a succession/coexistence of any of these" (Juneja and Kravagna, 2013: 25)

The forthcoming sections of this chapter will delve deeper into the specifics of this thesis task and argument, as well as the theoretical and methodological tools employed. The upcoming section will focus on the development of Nepali Studies. I will examine the type of knowledge that has been gathered about Nepal over time, how this knowledge has interacted with historical circumstances, and identify what new insights are currently necessary. I will also discuss the methods and theories required to generate these insights.

(Re)mapping Nepali Studies

Nepal, officially known as the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal, is an independent nation-state situated along the southern slopes of the Himalayan mountain ranges, with a territorial scale of 147,200 square kilometres and a population of 29.3 million (World Bank, 2019). It is landlocked by India to the east, south, and west, and borders the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) of China to the north. The geological history of the Himalayan area originated around 70 million years ago when what is now the Indian subcontinent collided with Central Asia, which also contributed to the formation of Nepal's geographical division from north to south into the High Himalayas, Middle Hills, and Tarai (plains) (Whelpton, 2005). These natural geographic conditions dictate this land's interaction patterns with its neighbours from the North and South, as the mountains present inaccessibility while, to a greater extent, the plain is

deemed as the facilitator of mobile flows. The natural geographic determinism of Nepal's location, to some extent, implies that compared to its relations with the South, Nepal's relations with the North seem looser and more accidental.

The very brief introduction above involves several fundamental geographic, cultural, and political concepts for people to map Nepal out in complicated coordination systems, such as Nepal, China, India, Himalayan mountains, TAR, Indian subcontinent, and Tarai. Such a method of knowing about Nepal with the help of these coordinates requires the prerequisite of a universal categorisation of the world. In other words, such a map can only be learnt, but not created by people. Standing in front of such a well-drawn map, the only work people need to do is to locate Nepal on it. In this map, units like Nepal, China, and India are divided as mutually exclusive "functional regions" (Agnew, 2013: 9) to support each other's geographic existence and examine specific phenomena such as cultural communications and trade. Naturalised factors make human traces invisible in the process, such as human activities in the assumedly uninhabitable Himalayan mountains and the making of the Tarai plain as the result of British colonial expansion.

Conventionally, people are more accustomed to understanding Nepal with exclusive nation-state-affiliated close-end traits. Meanwhile, boundary-crossing movements are largely regarded as forces that demolish, deconstruct, and destabilise, in the best cases, and/or change the specific traits of areas or nation-states, thus making the concepts of race, state, and area complicated and ambiguous. Comprehending Nepal as a trait area to a process area (Appadurai, 2000) represents a shift of ontology and epistemology. The former, realistic one, "conjures up the idea of a homogeneous block of space that has a persisting distinctiveness due to its physical and cultural characteristics… that it exists 'out there' in the world…[with] a prior requirement to think that the world is divided up in this way" (Agnew, 1999: 92). It treats an area like Nepal as a natural entity separated from internal and external social and historical processes, emphasising its particular and sometimes exclusive traits, and these seemingly neutral and natural traits have "the definite presence… since time immemorial" (Winichakul, 1994: 12). The corresponding epistemology is positivist, in which knowledge is the result of empirical verification; thus, people are "meant to help collect information and data to build up encyclopaedic-style knowledge about these spatially fixed focus entities" (Mielke and Hornidge, 2017: 6). Moreover, the tasks undertaken are informative and of discovery. Their eyes, putatively, are innocent and unharmful (Pratt, 1992), and the information collected, with

observers' full capabilities and understanding, are accurate and trustworthy. The knowledge produced is a truthful reflection of the original forms of those areas before the intervention and arrival of 'outsiders'. As Victor King (2005: 2) indicates that

> "The preoccupation with region is charged with being old-fashioned, ethnocentric, parochial, politically conservative, essentialist and empiricist in its mission to chart distinctive culture-language zones and draw boundaries in an increasingly changing, globalizing world."

The ethnocentric, essentialist, and empiricist characteristics of Nepal, masked by the narrative of discovering an area untouched by modernity, should be recognisable to any scholar or layperson with an interest in Nepal or the broader Himalayan region. To a significant degree, this knowledge production and the corresponding depiction of Nepal represent processes of asymmetrical globalisation and colonial expansion from Western metropolitan 'centres' to the receptive Himalayan 'peripheries'. Throughout and following the colonial era, various agents from Europe - including missionaries, explorers, diplomatic officers, Orientalists, anthropologists, Hippy travellers, and NGO staff - have made substantial contributions to the collection, classification, and interpretation of numerous materials. These materials are generally accepted as truthful reflections of specific parts of Nepal, based on the broad assumption that Nepal is a remote area, historically and geographically independent from Western civilisations.

The initial Western exploration of the land where the nation-state of Nepal is now situated began as early as the seventeenth century when Jesuits recorded several observations of the country on their trans-Himalayan routes (Michaels, 2018). The records they left, judged by contemporary standards, are full of unvarnished Orientalist discrimination. For instance, during his transit through Nepal from Beijing, China in 1662, Johann Grueber, a Jesuit, stigmatised local women as "so ugly that they seem to look more like devils than like human… also so dirtied by this oil that one could not take them for humans anymore, but for witches" (Grueber, 1662 cited in Michaels, 2018: 3). Over several subsequent centuries, more Europeans entered Nepal, their views claiming to be more neutral, rational, and scientific than those of their Jesuit predecessor. The materials they collected and compiled are comprehensive, including almost every aspect of the country, such as its geography, geology, flora and fauna, economy, inhabitants and their customs, history, and political institutions. Some of these materials remain

influential to contemporary scholars learning about this area. For instance, Brian Hodgson, the former British Resident in Kathmandu in the early nineteenth century, is attributed to the origin of Nepali and Himalayan Studies for his comprehensive academic contribution to the research of Buddhism, languages, and Zoology (Waterhouse ed., 2004). Moreover, French Indologist Sylvain Levi's (1989) creative work on discovering Nepal's traces in Chinese and Tibetan resources lays the foundation and template for later scholars to investigate this country's history and relations with neighbouring countries.

In many cases, the scientific gaze is also accompanied by a curious gaze, which adds thrilling and exciting plots to a supposedly objective narrative. For instance, the French polymath Gustav Le Bon's (2014) account of an archaeological mission in Nepal devotes a considerable length to documenting his adventure to the forbidden kingdom as the first Frenchman. He records the hardship he must overcome to cross the jungle, where the dangers not only include vicious animals, unpredictable and barely tolerable weather, but also untrustworthy local people, as his porters abandon him in the middle of the jungle. The plots of the adventure are burnished by an ending of glorious but subtle conquest as he describes in detail how a large local crowd gathers along streets to witness his arrival. *Voyage to Nepal* and similar books of the genre simultaneously construct two binarily opposite but interlinked figures. One illustrates "a scientific, apolitical, disinterested, knowledge-seeking 'gentleman' braving all odds to study non-Western cultures" (Anand, 2007: 24), which mirrors a Nepali (Oriental) people who possess all contradictory characteristics.

Another genre of Western writing on Nepal, including fictional works set in Nepal and travelogues of literary merits (Hutt, 1996a), more blatantly projects the gaze from curious eyes, showing how Nepal is embedded in the West's powerful collective imagination of the East and supported by the unequal political structure (Kabbani, 1986). The most well-known and influential work of this genre may be James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (2015), from which the fictional Shangri-la, a lost spiritual land somewhere in Tibet where all goodness of human civilisation is preserved, became one of the most attractive identities of Nepal to the rest of the world. The fantasy of Shangri-la belongs to the West's historical tradition of imagining a lost paradise, and Hilton was the first writer who successfully mapped out such a mysterious paradise in the geography of reality (Hutt, 1996b). Though the name of Shangri-la may not be directly mentioned in many fictional or non-fictional works after James Hilton, the mysteriously essentialised template created by him has been followed by the West-centric

global cultural industry till now. From David Snellgrove's *Himalayan Pilgrimage* (Snellgrove, 2011), Han Suyin's *Mountain is Young* (1958), Peter Matthieson's *The Snow Leopard* (1998), to Jeff Greenwald's *Shopping for Buddhas: An Adventure in Nepal* (1990), Frederick Selby's *Postcards from Kathmandu* (2008), then to the Hollywood's global blockbuster *Doctor Strange* (2016), despite their various production periods, creators' backgrounds, and genre, they remain highly uniformed in a deep, nostalgic reflection of nature, spirituality, and the human condition with the allure of exotic cultures.

What commonly characterises the models of Nepal through the eyes of science and the eyes of romantic curiosity is the intention of rendering it exotic and the institutionalised powers that make that happen. The boundaries between fictional and non-fictional/scientific representations of Nepal and the broader Himalayan areas are ambiguous. Not only because both shared the same database (e.g. archive, travelogue, journalism, and ethnography), but also because the driving force was rooted in the West's historical project of imaging other parts of the world, which was significantly facilitated by and acted as a crucial part of the expansion of Europe's colonial power to many non-European areas in the world.

The heyday of information collection projects in Nepal arrived in the mid-twentieth century when the country opened its gates to the rest of the world. Since then, Nepal has become a fertile ground for Western anthropologists and their colleagues from relatively more developed Asian countries like Japan, Korea, and Singapore. In addition to the factor that the Nepali administration changed to relatively flexible policies towards foreign scholars' research activities within its territory, the hardship for Western scholars to obtain research permissions in other neighbouring countries and areas, like Tibet, India, and Pakistan at that time served as a major force pushing foreign scholars to Nepal (Vinding and Bhattachan, 1985). Despite the collection and systematisation of information and knowledge about Nepal to a certain degree before the 1950s, for those earlier batches of Western scholars conducting anthropological activities in Nepal, this area still remained an "almost completely unknown country" (Fisher, 1985: 105). Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, the commonly agreed first foreign scholar who conducted systematic ethnographic research in Nepal, writes that "In 1953 Nepal was a country virtually unknown to anthropologists" (1964: xiii). Early examples of Western anthropologists' ahistorical attitudes toward Nepal, to a large extent, suggest their ignorance not only of existent materials, but also of "long historical processes involved behind the origin of such forces of social dynamics, acceptance, resistance in the fabric and framework of glorious traditions, and,

deep-rooted socio-psychological sentiments and pragmatic interpretations of cultural practices" (Devkota, 2001: 28). And as argued by Mary Des Chene (2007) and Sara Shneiderman (2010), the intricate historical and spatial forces ignored by not only those early Western anthropologists but also their colonial predecessors are those belonging to the Nepali state where the lack of history of the direct colonial administration of European countries is read as the absence of a national history per se. Following Fürer-Haimendorf, many works on Nepal conducted by Western scholars could be classified as an "anthropology of discovery and mapping" (des Chene, 2007: 211). The version of Nepal mapped out by Western anthropologists was biased and limited geographically and by themes. Geographically, the anthropological research conducted is centred on Himalayan or mid-hill parts of this country (Dahal, 2016) where the themes that garnered attention related to socio-cultural systems of varied ethnic groups, including family and clan structures, kinship, marriage, economy, religion and ritual those "wonderful aspects of human life…were considered to be the most relevant subject matters of anthropology in the eyes of those Western scholars." (Devkota, 2001: 27)

Moving away from the positivist approaches of their predecessors throughout the colonial era, with their view of Nepal as an ahistorical and natural entity where knowledge was also natural and pre-existent, Western scholars in the mid-20th century began to add more complex and nuanced understanding to these notions. They demonstrate more subjectivity and consciousness in systematising and institutionalising regional knowledge, connotation and denotation of the region itself, influenced by Euro-American-centric academic perspectives and theories. These scholars began to explore how the area of Nepal and the broader Himalayas can be defined or constructed. In September 1973, the 9th International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnographical Science was held in Chicago, and after that, many papers submitted to the conference were compiled and published in the volume Himalayan Anthropology-The Indo-Tibetan Interface (Fisher ed., 1978). As the volume's title directly suggests, it seeks to establish an "interface" method, which considers geographical, linguistic, ethnic, and religious factors, to (re)define the Himalayan region, including Nepal as one of many accidental by-products of the confluence stemming from the North and South. In the Foreword of this volume, Fürer-Haimendorf (1978: ix) writes that

> "The Himalayas are a region traversed by three of the major linguistic,
> racial, and cultural dividing lines of Asia. In the valleys of this great
> mountain range Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman languages dovetail

and overlap, populations of Caucasian racial features characteristic of North India met and merged with Mongoloid ethnic groups, and the two great Asian religions Hinduism and Buddhism coexist there and interact in various ways, In neither of these spheres are boundaries clear-cut, nor are the sequences of events which brought about the present kaleidoscopic pattern easily discernible."

James Fisher's Introduction to the volume further reveals the contributors' collective efforts to systemise the Himalayan area "as a place, as a site of knowledge production and as a career machine" (van Schendel, 2002: 649). Fisher begins his work by clarifying the task of this volume

"that by focusing on the entire region as an interface between two (or more) encompassing traditions, a range of diverse responses could be subsumed within a broad but common theoretical perspective… to provide the beginnings of an analytical framework for this neither-fish-nor-fowl contact zone." (1978: 1)

The necessity of systemising the Himalayan scholarship, as well as the obstacles, is the so-claimed extreme hybridity of the region as described as the

"The peripheries of these enormous, complex regions (South and Central Asia) meet, combine, and collide in the nooks and crannies of the world's highest mountain mass. … not so much a boundary, border, or buffer, as a zipper which stitches together these two densely textured cultural fabrics."

The efforts of theorising Nepal (the Himalayan areas) as the middle-land between diverse cultures, on the one hand, is instructed by the ontology of this area as the co-existing place of many stateless, namely, primitive societies; on the other hand, is mediated by factors which are seemingly remote from the area analysed, the motivation to unite loosely connected academic bodies in Western universities.

The interface model of conceptualising Nepal as a crucible of diverse culture, while insightfully capturing the intricate interculturality of this area, largely ignores "the histories of state formation that have served as the impetus for such processes of migration and mixture" (Shneiderman, 2010: 298). In other words, if everything inside and outside Nepal in the Himalayan region is simply a mixture of other things, then what is Nepal? Although people, ideas, information, and products do travel around in this area, how do they rest and stay, and how are these flows confined, sustained, and regulated by local political and economic situations? Largely failing to properly address these questions, such a 'mobile' theorisation of Nepal, resembling many current prevailing discourses of globalisation, neglects locally grounded dynamics while celebrating the overwhelming and hegemonic power of mobility which is usually firmly controlled and regulated by some superior forces. This theoretical model, as criticised by many Nepali scholars, is trapped, meanwhile, contributing to two interlinked fallacies, Shangri-la-lising the country and denying it "a representation as a real society with its own originality, power dynamics, changes, happiness and sufferings experienced by real people" (Tamang et al., 2016: 110). In des Chene's (2007: 212-213) words, the "interface" image of Nepal conditioned by early research dominated by Western scholars is closely related to two other images, the "fossil" and "Shangri-la", which entails the implication that "the Tibeto-Burman peoples of the mid-hills … and to a lesser extent the caste Hindus of this region that represent true Nepali culture".

Generally, the Western anthropological tradition of searching for the 'other' led scholars to Nepal and other Himalayan areas that are considered "exotic, isolated and untouched by the modern industrial value system and technology" (Subedi and Uprety, 2014: 30), and the imposition of cultural romanticism has forced the "anthropology of Nepal to stay at the cross-roads of intellectual colonialism and cultural romanticism" (Devkota, 2001: 28). Regarding local scholars' criticism towards Western scholars' cultural colonialisation and romanticisation of Nepal, James Fisher, while acknowledging the existence of such a tendency, rationalises it with cultural relativism, arguing that "The reason is that Nepal has retained something the West has lost in the process of becoming 'developed', and we come here, among other places, looking for it" (Fisher, 1987: 35). Such an excuse, arranging Nepal and the West on different ends of a linear spectrum of development and modernisation seems to oppose the notion of cultural relativism that "societies and cultures cannot be ranked on an evolutionary scale" (Brown, 2008: 365). It again implies Nepali culture exists as a close-end total social world and

reaffirms the fossil image of this country, making it a reiteration of the Blue Moon Valley from Hilton's novel in academic terms.

The Orientalist burden borne by the Western anthropologists of that era is insightfully summarised by Gerard Toffin (2009: 272-273), when he comments on the fiftieth anniversary of the development of French anthropology in Nepal, that

> "For these anthropologists, the Nepali Himalayas represented an outstanding laboratory, … because it was largely assumed that Nepal was a sanctuary of old socio-religious forms now extinct both in India and in Tibet, which have continued to evolve in their own way in these mountains. This Himalayan area was and still is seen as a peripheral space, a borderline, an 'interstitial zone,' at the junction between the well-defined South-Asian civilization to the South and the Chinese/ Tibetan cultural area to the north."

Toffin also reflexively considers the Orientalism burden as "a handicap" that leads them to ignore the "successive manipulations of power, the contextualized situations, and the historical transformations" (Ibid: 293) of Nepal's experiences. The ideas of des Chene, Toffin, and Shneiderman mentioned above are illustrative instances reflecting Western academia's re-examination of how Nepal can be alternatively imagined and conceptualised as adjusting to new global situations. In other words, they are exploring how to minimise the original sins of Nepali studies, developing new theoretical and methodological frameworks to define the boundaries and contents of both the academic area and the socio-geographic region.

During the latter half of the 20th century, scholars globally, although still predominantly from Europe and North America, began to consciously avoid their Eurocentric biases (Tamang, Dhakal & Rai, 2016) and place Nepal in a broader global context. For instance, Vincanne Adams (1996), in her study on Sherpas—a consistent focus of Western academic inquiry on Nepal—investigates the "virtual" identities of Sherpas produced through Western imaginations and scrutinises the persistent Western anthropological desire for an authentic site beyond their everyday life. Meanwhile, Sherry Ortner (1999: 21-24) highlights the dominant power of Sherpa representation. However, she slightly diverges from Adams' ideas and proposes the theoretical framework of serious games to "deconstruct sahib representations for their

Orientalism... while also seeking to establish Sherpa perspectives ethnographically". Ortner's framework emphasises the interplay of discourse and action in shaping human experience and history:

> "...human experience is never just 'discourse', and never just 'acts', but is some inextricably interwoven fabric of images and practices, conceptions and actions in which history constructs both people and the games that they play, and in which people make history by enacting, reproducing, and transforming those games."

Furthermore, some scholars have succeeded in shifting focus from rural, mountainous Nepal to its urban, metropolitan contexts—thereby changing the arena of Ortner's serious games to Kathmandu and the global flows connected to this city. Mark Liechty (2003) departs from the conventional caste lens to examine urban Nepali, identifying class as a significant new factor shaping urban life in the country's capital. Under the general theme of class and urban culture, Liechty (2010) writes extensively on Kathmandu-centric social histories, covering sub-themes such as middle-class culture, youth culture, media history, consumption history, and the transnational history of tourism development in Nepal. His goal is to illuminate Nepali expressions of global socioeconomic dynamics. Similarly, scholars like Heather Hindman (2013, 2002) use the study of Kathmandu-based expatriate culture as a lens to explore the relationship between Nepal and global (im)mobilities. Despite linking Nepal to global forces, recent Western knowledge production generally strives to avoid rehashing conventional Orientalised fallacies and dissolving the nation-state's culture into larger regional or global cultures.

Unfortunately, the reformative campaign of Nepali Studies has not widely permeated many non-Western academic fields. Here, the expansive—and at times invasive—colonial knowledge system of Nepal has become the academic norm and the foundation for the establishment of the discipline. For example, the so-called origins of modern Nepali Studies in China can be traced back to the early twentieth century. At this time, Chinese intellectuals and later the state, relying on European norms of history and nation, sought to learn from Nepal and build solidarity with the neighbouring state to counteract colonialism and imperialism (Yang and Chen, 2023).

The development of this academic field in China was sluggish, heavily influenced by the geopolitics of the Cold War era. The earliest Nepali Studies research from the People's Republic of China, consisting of several articles focusing on China's historical links with Nepal (Chen, 1961; Huang, 1962, 1961, 1955; Yin, 1956), were published in the 1950s and 1960s. Early scholars of Nepali Studies in the PRC were primarily historians of Chinese history. Consequently, as opposed to their anthropologist colleagues who collected data from empirical fieldwork, these historians primarily drew on Chinese historical records, focusing on constructing a shared past between the two countries. This origin underscores the tight connection between Nepali Studies and History in China. For about two decades, only a thin brochure (approximately 50 pages) (Ning, 1977) was published by the Commercial Press in Beijing, offering an introduction to basic aspects of Nepal. Not until 1980 was the PRC's first encyclopaedic monograph of Nepal (Wang, 1980) published by the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS). Three decades later, a new version was published in 2010 (Wang ed., 2010), as part of the state-sponsored CASS's 141-volume publication plan aims at compiling a comprehensive encyclopaedic book series covering most countries, areas, and international organisations worldwide.

Wang Hongwei, an emeritus professor of CASS, has been one of the few specialists in Nepali Studies in P.R. China since the 1960s. His academic career, to a large extent, may depict how Nepali Studies in China derived substantially from Indian Studies and was largely motivated by China's competitive stance with the USA during the Cold War. The ensuing narrative acknowledges Wang's interview (Zhu, 2015) and his memoir (Wang, 2011) on Ji Xianlin, PRC representative Indologist. In the 1950s, Wang studied Hindi literature at Peking University. In 1963, he visited Nepal as a member of a Chinese delegation attending Nepal's national literature conference, making him one of the few Chinese scholars who had personally visited Nepal. In 1963 and 1965, based on his brief experiences in Nepal, he published two travelogue-like articles in Guangming Daily, one of the PRC mainstream newspapers, celebrating the shared anti-colonial/imperial experiences and friendship between the two countries (Wang, 1963, 1965).

Nonetheless, his systematic research on Nepal only commenced around fifteen years later, in 1978, when he began working in the South Asian department of CASS, directed by Ji Xianlin at the time. Wang admits that he initially wanted to join other colleagues in conducting India-related research. However, Ji convinced him to pursue Nepali Studies, which was barely

explored by other researchers at CASS at the time, due to his previous experience in Nepal. Wang's research on Nepal was largely characterised by the Cold War's rivalry between the West and East blocs, more specifically, between China and the USA. He recollects that in 1984, he received an invitation from Leo Rose, an American expert on Nepal, to write an article for the journal *Asian Survey*. Wang perceived this opportunity for academic exchange as a test extended from the USA to assess the qualification of Chinese scholarship in Nepal. In 1985, Wang's article, Sino-Nepal Relations in the 1980s (Wang, 1985), was published in the journal, making him the first PRC scholar to have published work on Nepal in English.

In the tradition of Wang, a considerable portion of contemporary Nepali Studies conducted in Chinese can be categorised under the discipline of International Relations. These studies aim to understand the state from a top-down perspective, focusing on its macro-level relations with regional and global powers. However, these works often overlook the nuances of Nepal itself, as their primary concern lies with China's regional security and interests. Prioritising the investigation of state and state relationships, this body of scholarship perceives them as extensions of the state, arranged in masculinised hierarchical structures where the narrative of shared local history is translated into a celebration of states' brotherhood, which dominates other forms of interactions and emotions.

The existing framework for understanding Nepal is not only theoretically outmoded but also methodologically rigid. However, rather than outrightly criticising the current state of Nepali Studies in China, I interpret its status as a compromise, influenced by factors such as academic tradition, domestic political restrictions on academia in China, institutional incompatibilities within universities, reliance on state sponsorship as a primary funding source, and publication opportunities. It is widely acknowledged (please refer to all citations on the development of Area Studies in the West in the last section) that the rise and fall of Area Studies in the West are heavily reliant on state interests and projects. This is almost identical in the Chinese context.

The discipline of Area Studies in China is nascent and its rapid development is significantly catalysed by China's growing global presence in recent years, particularly as it pertains to its Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Consequently, an essentialised, top-down, and holistic perspective has emerged and matured with the development of the academic community. A larger proportion of attention and resources is directed to powerful entities and key players that

may have a more substantial impact on China's global presence, leaving marginalised areas like Nepal in the lurch.

For those scholars who do accord attention to countries like Nepal, a portion of their task is rhetorical, with the objective of justifying China's global presence rather than critiquing it. Choosing topics such as evaluating state-to-state cooperation in different sectors, such as the implementation of the BRI in Nepal, China-Nepal cooperation in tourism, the exchange of governing experience between political parties under the BRI framework, and China's investments in Nepal, will likely enable researchers to secure funding more easily and increase publication opportunities. Consequently, many marginalised, heterogeneous, grounded, ambiguous, and even illicit individual and collective actors are deprived of their agency in the interactions between Nepal and China. When these actors are referenced, they are seamlessly incorporated into the prevailing state narratives because any alternative versions of their stories may compromise the interests of the sponsors.

This thesis seeks to uncover such alternative stories, not only because of the information that these alternative narratives convey, but also because of the nuanced dynamics of any 'official' versions of stories, particularly those that have been shaped and maintained by colonial, national, and global dominant powers. The sanctioned versions of stories are not inherently flawed, but they can be oppressive and predatory, exploiting vulnerable entities and obscuring their trajectories. Vulnerability and marginality are relative concepts. The network of hierarchy and asymmetry disconnects more vulnerable and marginalised agents, leading them to exploit each other rather than identifying a common adversary and the solidarity they should ideally possess.

Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) proposition argues that decolonisation and de-imperialisation could only occur among Asian countries during the era of direct interactions. However, the case from Nepali Studies and the forms of direct interactions between Nepal and China warns us that, to a large extent, such power remains trapped. The spectre of colonialism consistently lingers in the interactions between Nepal and China, and, as will be comprehensively detailed in subsequent chapters, it cannot be ignored when actors from both sides wish to understand each other.

For instance, when the majority of contemporary Chinese individuals express a desire to visit Nepal, they are often driven by forms of normalised Orientalist imaginings of the country, and they continue to perpetuate such Orientalist imaginings of Nepal through their creative cultural production. This is merely a single example. This thesis posits that colonialism permeates nearly every facet of the relationship between Nepal and China, from state-building to ordinary people's daily lives. The resultant dialectical relationship between Nepali Studies and many people's everyday life is a subject of particular interest here.

This research argues that the reframing of Nepali Studies in the context of Nepal-China interactions is not merely an abstract, transnational intellectual endeavour but also has implications for people's localised and grounded domestic life, primarily because both are influenced by an evolving, hegemonic, and globalising trend of development and modernity. As readers will learn from subsequent chapters, the desires, frustration, and anxiety generated by the concepts of modernity and development have become the primary source of power in Nepal-China interactions since the twentieth century. Therefore, under the current circumstances between Nepal and China, the successful remapping of Nepali Studies will require a degree of disenchanted attitudes and practices from numerous Chinese agents. The success of this remapping effort will also aid people in gaining a deeper understanding of the asymmetrical power dynamics prevalent in their everyday lives, and vice versa.

In summary, this thesis posits that Area Studies are intrinsically tied to power dynamics; they not only reflect the powers that shape them but also propagate these powers into other domains. Consequently, any change in the dynamics of power or area-specific knowledge will logically induce a shift in the other. Delving into the process of knowledge production relating to specific regions, such as Nepal, reveals that hegemonic forces do not have exclusive control over it. Instead, it is the product of a diverse array of agents, each possessing complex relationships with these hegemonic powers. Acknowledging these agents' roles in shaping 'Nepal' and 'Nepali Studies' also validates their respective powers. A third assertion is that the shadow of colonialism extensively pervades the space between Nepal and China, its influence extending far beyond the confines of Nepali Studies. As a result, the decolonisation of Area Studies is postulated as a necessity for the discipline's revitalisation. This intricate process demands the creation of new, nuanced, and locale-specific knowledge. Such knowledge must be anchored in the lived experiences and perspectives of various regional actors, thereby acknowledging and validating local voices and experiences, and challenging existing hegemonies.

This thesis, therefore, seeks to remap Nepal by situating this area within various forms of power-geometries (Massey, 1994) that have been traditionally overlooked. It diverges from the traditional "geographically tethered, theoretically impoverished, methodologically indiscriminate, and instinctively imperial or neo-imperial" (Huat et al, 2019: 34) approaches to redefine this area, while simultaneously "inviting difference" (Harrison and Helgesen, 2019) into the sphere of knowledge production. The differences invited into this study are locally informed, globally disseminated, and heterogeneous, constituting the analytical framework that I refer to as the "Nepal-China contact". As I will elaborate further, "Nepal-China contact" signifies the multi-dimensional, interlinked processes of political, economic, religious, recreational and daily interactions that various actors from both countries establish with each other. These interactions occur in both 'virtual' and 'real' domains, typically conditioned by the respective and global circumstances and agendas of each country, as well as the regional, particularly geopolitical forces of which they are a part.

This analytical framework reconsiders Nepal as an area within the dramatically multi-layered and fluctuating "intensity, extensivity, and velocity of globalisation" (Harootunian & Miyoshi, 2002: 1). At the same time, it pays adequate attention to the individual, local, and regional positionality and spatiality (Jackson, 2019) of materials and knowledge. Generally, it aims to recontextualise Nepal and its relations with China, following suggestions of "the inter-Asia initiative", "from traitism to process studies and comparativism", and "inter-Asia cultural studies" (Huat et al, 2019: 37-43). This approach aims to extricate the knowledge production work of Nepal from the niche it finds itself in of being Western-dominated ahistorical, apolitical, and mystified. Drawing from Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) potent statement of using Asia as method, this study employs the Nepal-China contact as a method to reassess Nepal as an area.

Clarifying the Terms: Envisioning "New Nepali Studies" as a Transcultural Conduit

I realise that the employment of the terms "New Nepali Studies" and "Nepali Studies between Nepal and China" in this thesis can be regarded as problematic. Nevertheless, I argue that they serve a deliberate and strategic purpose, acting as catalysts to stimulate further discourse. Central to this study are the multifaceted dimensions of bodies of knowledge pertaining to Nepal, rather than a structured, institutionalised academic paradigm, primarily informed by

what can be described as "Chinese perspectives." Crucially, the foundation of these knowledge bodies is derived from lived experiences and interactions on the ground.

It is incumbent upon us to discern the veracity and potentially problematic nature of these knowledge bodies. Some might argue certain foundational aspects are misinformed or skewed. However, these are not merely theoretical constructs. Moreover, simplistic binary assessments of 'accurate' versus 'erroneous' are insufficient frameworks to encapsulate their complexities. These knowledge forms are birthed from real-world interactions and palpably manifest in everyday encounters. The use of the term "(New) Nepali Studies" in this context is therefore imbued with an aspiration: Could these diverse bodies of knowledge coalesce into a legitimate field of study someday? I posit this with a buoyant affirmation.

The actors at the heart of these knowledge bodies should not be relegated to a peripheral role as mere conduits or recipients of an established, hegemonic epistemology or a standardised iteration of Nepali Studies. On the contrary, they are instrumental in the creation of knowledge, albeit devoid of institutional validation.

The designation "Nepali Studies between Nepal and China" serves to underscore the uniqueness, comparative facets, and circulatory dynamics characterising the academic field that I envision in this thesis. This rendition does not seamlessly dovetail with traditional interpretations of Nepali Studies as delineated in mainstream academic circles globally. Detractors might decry this delineation as amorphous, straddling the divide between established Nepali and Chinese studies. However, it can be conceptualised as a symbiotic nexus between the two, heralding a nascent interdisciplinary sub-domain.

Emphasising the fluid and constructed essence of "Nepali Studies between Nepal and China," I aim to ascribe it to specific actors, locales, and networks. Beyond these confines, such a conceptualisation of "Nepali Studies" may indeed seem elusive, even nonsensical. For instance, while a hypothetical "Nepali Studies between Nepal and Japan/Korea" might echo similar knowledge structures, the nuances and relevance differ markedly. They operate under different contextual umbrellas and are, to a degree, incommensurable.

This incommensurability underscores the necessity to guard against any hegemonic tendencies that might aim to homogenise diverse entities. Perhaps audaciously, I foresee myriad

permutations of Nepali Studies, with the version elucidated in this thesis representing just one iteration. Yet, these diverse versions, in spite of their distinctiveness, possess the potential for dialogue and mutual enrichment, accentuating the comparative aspect.

In summation, the nomenclature of "Nepali Studies" employed here advocates for a reimagined, eclectic and refreshed approach to understanding Nepal- a vista shaped by a mosaic of stakeholders, synergised through their shared yet distinct historical, transcultural, and situational trajectories.

Nepal-China Contact - A Transcultural Comparative Theoretical Framework

The overarching research question, or rather, the research approach to the hypothesis is about how we can conduct a new form of Nepali Studies that reflects the subjectivity of local people and benefits their lives. This general question is based on two epistemological shifts that I have consistently reiterated throughout this introductory chapter and will continue to examine throughout the thesis: who has the power to define areas and who should Area Studies serve? Traditional and prevalent methods of Area Studies are Western-dominated, nation-state-oriented, and backed by resource-rich patrons. The corresponding projects, for the most part, positioned from an elevated perspective, often lack the sensitivity to recognise local nuances as integral to knowledge production.

Having said that, I acknowledge that an all-inclusive method is scarcely feasible as local people, far from being uniform and stable, are diverse, mutable and engaged in ongoing debates. Consequently, this thesis, while working towards a new form of Nepali Studies, does not aim to establish another hegemonic framework that claims to explain the full picture. It recognises that the complete fulfilment of Nepali Studies is impossible, and each study can, at its best, only offer a series of snapshots. The process of adding these snapshots does not necessarily reveal an increasingly clearer picture, as each snapshot is subjectively framed, influenced by varying temporal and spatial angles. Therefore, the Nepal-China contact perspective is also selective and interpretative. It does not seek to (nor can it) act as an overreaching explication of Nepal, but rather as a modest provider of locally conditioned and comparative snapshot-like perspectives.

A crucial prerequisite for this comparative snapshot is a more flexible definition of area, conceptualising it "as a temporal-spatial constellation within which various time dimensions and spatial scales, ranging from local to global, intersect…open to human mobility as well as translocal and transregional dimensions" (Houben et al., 2020: 53). Otherwise, it hardly makes sense as to why the study of Nepal can invite China and Chinese trajectories as anchors, and why the study of contact - the temporal, mobile and unstable links, rather than the concrete traits of subjects themselves, can contribute to the formation of subjects. The contact perspective also necessitates a transcultural understanding of areas as contact zones - the "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination…as they are lived out across the globe today" (Pratt, 1992: 4). Rather than obsessing over a specific and concrete geography, the contact zone pays more attention to the intricacy of various historical and contemporary power dynamics and their manifestation and transformation of specific geographies.

"Transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone," writes Pratt (1992: 6), "...to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture." However, Pratt does not stop at the unidirectional transmission from the empires to their colonies as she further asks a more "heretical" question: "with respect to representation, how does one speak of transculturation from the colonies to the metropolis?" To understand the bidirectional tableau of power relations of transculturation, Pratt (1992: 7) introduces the idea of a "contact perspective", which "emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other," and "treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and 'travelees,' not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power." The contact perspective, in James Clifford's 'contact zone-ised' museums (1997: 213), "views all culture-collecting strategies as a response to particular histories of dominance, hierarchy, resistance, and mobilization." Such intertwined and mutually influential power relations at play, as exemplified in Pratt's work (1992: 7), is "autoethnography", a type of creative cultural process where "colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms." Therefore, while colonisers directly collected materials from colonies, asserting power and shaping other areas and peoples' knowledge, their understanding of the world outside their homelands were, in turn, informed and shaped by agents from the colonies. The already complicated power relations

between colonisers and colonised during transculturation are further complicated, as suggested by scholars like Clare Harris (2017) and Markus Viehbeck (2017), as on the grounds of contact zones, localised powers are not equally shared by everyone and its receptions among people are also varied. Therefore, the inquiries of transculturation and contact zones should also be historicised, spatialised, localised, and individualised. This thesis's Nepal-China contact framework closely follows their sensitivities to complicating power relations in respective contexts.

Pratt has made significant contributions to systematising the concept of transculturation, but the idea originated from the late Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz. In his work *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, Ortiz coined the concept of transculturación to critique the notion that an externally imposed culture could completely supplant and eradicate the pre-existing culture of a colonised population (Stauder, 2013). Ortiz emphasised the transformative infusion of cultures leading to a novel culture, focusing more on the process of transculturation than on its traits (Ibid).

Following Ortiz, the concept of transculturation gained considerable academic attention, especially from the 1990s onward. Scholars such as Pratt, Clifford, and Paul Gilroy have developed the concept further. Gilroy (2007) critiques essentialist views on black identities, arguing that Eurocentric ideas shared a nationalistic focus antithetical to the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural international formation he termed the "black Atlantic."

German scholar Wolfgang Welsch (1999) refined the concept of transculturality, distinguishing it from related concepts like interculturality and multiculturality. He argues that these concepts treated cultures as if they were isolated islands or spheres. Welsch sees transculturality as embracing the internal differentiation and complexity of modern cultures, marked by high levels of hybridisation and facilitated by external networking. His pioneering efforts to develop the idea of transculturality that is not "based on the principle that a single culture, in and of itself, for maturity requires interaction and dialogue with other cultures" (Milhouse et al., 2001: ix), challenge established classifications of race, religion, sexuality, and class (Ní Éigeartaigh and Berg, 2010), arguing that such restrictive comparisons lead to essentialising models or purely impressionistic observations and generalisations (Juneja and Pernau, 2009).

Following the general theorisation of transculturation, scholars from diverse fields, such as art history, media, popular culture, area studies, and global history, have provided numerous comparative cases that demonstrate transculturation in practice. (e.g. Annett, 2014; Brosius and Wenzlhuemer, 2011; Cho et al., 2013; Hepp and Couldry, 2009; Herren et al., 2012; Juneja, 2011; Juneja and Kravagna, 2013; Viehbeck, 2017) In this thesis, I have distilled five elements or power dynamics from the abovementioned discussions of transculturation: flow, practice, boundary, representation, and asymmetry. These elements form the backbone of the Nepal-China contact framework.

My theoretical framework is heavily inspired by the famous theoretical framework of cultural articulation, the Circuit of Culture (see du Gay et al., 1997), where representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation are interwoven. Despite their conceptual distinctness, in reality these processes overlap and lack neat boundaries in reality, which will be reflected in the following discussion.

The concept of flow is central to studies of contact, encounter, interaction, and entanglement. Juneja (Juneja and Kravagna, 2013) refines Welsch's concept of transculturality, defining transculturation as a transformative process that evolves through prolonged cultural interactions and relationships, focusing on spatial mobility and circulation. Similarly, Brosius and Wenzlhuemer (2011: 15) describe flows as dynamic processes spanning time and space, involving various tangible and intangible products. Scholars such as Castells (2009, 2004, 1999, 1989) have extensively employed the term "flow" in the fields of social sciences and cultural studies to represent and interrogate globalisation processes. For Castells (2009: 412), "flows" are more likely to be intangible, encompassing capital, information, technology, organisational interactions, images, sounds, and symbols. He further suggests that flows dissolve the temporal sequence of events, creating a society characterised by 'eternal ephemerality' (2009: 497). According to Stalder (2001), the space of flows is organised not in a linear, discontinuous manner, but in a way that allows for continuous movement.

Castells' conceptualisation of flows as pure, simultaneous, autonomous moving processes and his sort of binary division of mobility and immobility, are critically reviewed by other scholars who "do not entirely agree with…the global condition as one of mobility, fluidity or liquidity" (Sheller, 2014: 79). For instance, Smith (1996: 69) warns us, "capital and information are never entirely free of place, and spatial fluidity is only ever achieved via a parallel and deepening

spatial fixity which at crucial moments reasserts itself." Moreover, Hannam et al. (2006) argue that flows are not always about being in motion because "there is no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility."

Comprehensively considering the aforementioned debates of flows, my framework employs flow as an analytical tool to examine various mobile as well as immobile processes connecting and disconnecting Nepal and China, and other locales around the world, across time and space. These are kept torn apart and remixed by various contradictory and interlinked powers of moving/placed, global/local, and empower/oppress. Between Nepal and China, such flows, in terms of movements of people, ideas, products, and capital, are historically significant, predating the globalisation that is conventionally understood by people. These flows repeatedly cross the boundaries of Nepal and China throughout history; meanwhile, it was precisely these flows that have kept drawing and redrawing geographic and cultural boundaries between these two areas, engendering a blend of cultures. However, these flows are largely ignored, partially due to the specific local historiography and partially due to their incompatibility with West-dominated discourses of modernisation and globalisation. Since the 1950s, especially after the 2000s, impacted by new domestic, global, and geopolitical conditions, new flows between Nepal and China have been motivated and influenced by types of asymmetrical power relations within and outside the concerned areas.

How do we understand the relations between old and new flows? How are the flows constructed and conditioned? What kind of actors are involved in the processes of shaping and facilitating the flows between Nepal and China? What are the infrastructures that condition, facilitate, or challenge these flows? And how do flows challenge, shape, and reshape the boundaries of nations and communities?

This thesis also recognises, however, that immobility is as important as mobility, if not more so. Overemphasising the moving characteristic of flows between Nepal and China, at best, can only present half the picture of the comprehensive situations of the contact zones. On the one hand, it will mislead people into overlooking the experience of stickiness occurring within the contact zones, stigmatising them as abnormal phenomena as mobility is legitimised and canonised. On the other hand, such ignorance is not conducive to understanding the complicated relative power structures between mobility and immobility. Therefore, when those aforementioned questions are explored, this thesis will also investigate them in immobile

situations. In general, what types of immobility, constraint, or interruption coexist with or emerge out of these border-crossing flows?

Moreover, the thesis departs from the conventional understanding of flows as progressive modern phenomena, advanced, facilitated, and sustained by modern technologies and world systems. Instead, it aims to explore the "explanatory paradigms that meaningfully address issues of multiple locations, palimpsestic temporalities, and processes of transcultural configurations" (Juneja, 2011: 276).

The flow-centred exploration inevitably involves inquiries into other foundational processes within the Nepal-China contact framework. The investigation of transcultural, processual phenomena within the Nepal-China contact zone quickly necessitates an exploration of relevant practices on the ground within the contact zone. In this framework, practices refer to the materiality (Herren, 2010, as cited in Brosius & Wenzlhuemer, 2011) of transcultural flows—namely, the behaviours of various agents that initiate, sustain, contain, or stop flows. Meanwhile, these carriers of flows—their bodies, minds, and behaviours—are part of the flows facilitated or inhibited by them. These actors, situated at different points within power networks, range from state apparatus to transborder wanderers with minimal capital. Horizontally, even wanderers are not homogenous, each of them having varied agendas and originating from different backgrounds, which bring about nuances of difference in their seemingly similar practices. If flows, to a larger extent, represent macro-level collective activities, practices generally represent those on the micro-level and are individually based. Like their macro-level counterparts, the practices of different actors' practices constantly cross boundaries of various vertical and horizontal circles, as well as shaping and reshaping boundaries. Central to the exploration of practices in this thesis are issues of identity, social structures, power relations, capital, and accidents. The relationships between these elements and practices are flexible, changeable, and mutually affected.

Moreover, practices can be observed in various settings, from diplomatic conference rooms to the streets of Thamel, Nepal's tourist centre. On-ground daily practices, some legal and welcomed, others ostracised, and many residing in disputed grey zones, contrast with the prevailing discourses of Nepal-China communications, which are highly state-dominated. These practices represent an important momentum in the contact zone. Avoiding entrapment by vague umbrella concepts like people-to-people communication, this thesis critically

employs the idea of daily practices as resistant tactics (Certeau, 1984) to explore the variety of social actors participating in flow-making and -unmaking in various contact zones.

Boundary-related issues are unavoidable for transcultural studies and Area Studies. While scholars like Castells advocate for borderless, autonomous spaces of flows, observations from my fieldwork indicate that even in the Nepal-China contact zone, where most of the population is highly mobile, numerous boundaries—nation-state, geography, culture, class, caste, habits, and interests—exist. The practices of various actors can, at best, be described as consistent efforts to breach, traverse, and reshape these boundaries, and sometimes, to construct new types of boundaries altogether.

Following the warning that "the notion of permanent flux and unboundedness does not permit us to look more closely at the dialectic between the dissolution of certain boundaries and the reaffirmation of other kinds of difference, of how deterritorialization is invariably followed by reterritorialization" (Juneja, 2011: 275), this thesis focuses on the embodied experience of boundaries. With the construction and elimination of boundaries comes the transformation of space and place in terms of material properties and meanings. Rather than treating these boundaries and the spaces delineated by them as static material aggregations directed by supreme social and economic regulations, this thesis—emphasising their cultural meaning—contextualises their material settings with various contested social and cultural relations.

Beyond exploring places and spaces with "extraterritorial and international character" (Herren et al., 2012: 7), this thesis also investigates local or domestic settings, regarding them as small or micro-scale transcultural contact zones. In these zones, not only are their boundaries unstable, but they also accommodate various sub-boundaries between Nepali and Chinese, Chinese and Chinese, Nepali and Nepali. As Annett (2014: 5) describes, the transcultural circulation of media platforms is "lateral and rhizomatic." These spaces and their boundaries are also historical and decentralised, which necessitates a multi-site, multi-layer investigation of spatial boundaries, as well as their contemporary and historical relations.

Moreover, contacts between Nepal and China are not necessarily confined to physical grounds as virtual spaces are becoming increasingly prominent locations for various exchanges, particularly when on-ground 'real' channels were forced to close due to unexpected incidents like the COVID-19 pandemic. Transcultural activities such as writing and sharing travelogues

and Vlogs online, streaming Nepali commercial productions on Chinese online platforms, and donating money to Nepali homeless people via social media, present both opportunities and challenges for studying boundaries in my project. How can boundaries be defined under these circumstances? What are the relationships between so-called virtual boundaries and boundaries in reality? Furthermore, how can the boundaries between virtuality and reality be reconceptualised?

In many cases, invisible ideological boundaries are more potent and instructive than tangible boundaries formed by mountains, rivers, and concrete walls. Ideological boundaries delineate the identities and representations of various agents involved, constructing notions of Nepaliness or Chineseness within the contact zone. "Representation," according to (Hall, 1997: 17), "is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language." For this thesis, the inquiry into representation is chiefly about how the meaning of Nepal is produced between Nepalis and Chinese in history and contemporaneously through what types of languages under what kinds of circumstances.

Records of Nepal in the Chinese language may be the earliest extant records of this country in any foreign language. As early as the 4th century, records of lands presently located in modern Nepal appeared in Chinese materials. Over the ensuing 1500 years, the land corresponding to modern Nepal, under various names and circumstances, continued to feature in diverse Chinese resources. Despite their extreme heterogeneity and depth, these ancient Chinese records of Nepal continue to serve as reliable materials not only for the Chinese to envision Nepal, but also for Nepal to construct a credible past for its self-representation.

This thesis will also investigate Nepal's (self-)representation as Shangri-la. What does Shangri-la mean to Nepal and China? How has Shangri-la become a dynamic element of the contact zone, and through what processes? How does it relate to the burgeoning development of Chinese tourism in Nepal? Importantly, besides Shangri-la, how can Nepal be envisioned alternatively within the contact zone? Since representation involves the process of mutual imagination, the exploration of the Chinese imagination of Nepal automatically implicates China's self-image and Nepal's self-imaginations and identification.

Asymmetries in transcultural interactions are consistently described in terms of their power dynamics (Baker, 2022; Dagnino, 2012; de Almeida, 2005; Pratt, 1992; Wilson and Maher,

2020). Scholars of transculturation have firmly established the asymmetry of power in transcultural interactions as the energy source that allows these interactions to occur and persist. Such ideas of asymmetrical power relations as transcultural energy, based on the binary division of domination and subordination, have received criticism from scholars (Rønning, 2011: 3), who writes,

> "I agree with Pratt that in these 'contact zones' cultures meet, but not
> necessarily in relationships which are binary-based, since the very core
> of transculturation is the ability to move freely from one cultural stance
> to another and back again."

Moving away from the asymmetrical-power model of transculturation, the late sinologist (Wagner, 2019: 17) argues that "asymmetry of power does not in itself produce an asymmetry in transcultural interaction, but can very well coexist with an inverse asymmetrical interaction in this domain." Based on this argument, Wagner (Ibid: 18-24) further proposes that

> "asymmetry in a transcultural interaction is a dependent variable of an
> asymmetry of power... is perceived as a marker of functionality...
> Perceived asymmetry stimulates agency, mainly to overcome it..."

Following Wagner's ideas of asymmetry of functionality, this thesis refers to asymmetries within the Nepal-China contact in terms of things beyond the asymmetrical powers of the two states. It can denote unequal access to representations, capital, and places. These asymmetrical relations exist between two states as well as between each individual in the contact zones. These relations are border-crossing and internal to each society. Efforts to overcome asymmetries may not lead to ideal symmetries but could create new asymmetries or enhance old ones. However, this does not imply that the unequal distributions of power among various actors in the contact zone are inconsequential. Rather than replacing power-centred analytical tools, I aim to introduce additional dimensions to examine asymmetries in the Nepal-China contact zone. Such a method is significantly informed by the data collected from my fieldwork in the contact zone, where, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapters, power relations are heterogeneous, temporary, conditional, and even reversible, as my story in the detention room clearly illustrates.

Methodology and Positionality

This thesis utilises a diverse toolkit of research methods to reconceptualise Nepali Studies and frame them in a new light. The central premise of the study, situated in the daily life experiences within a transnational context, necessitates extensive fieldwork. The primary fieldwork locations were in Nepal, mainly in Kathmandu, occasionally extending beyond the valley. The fieldwork can be distinctly divided into two periods: August 2016 to February 2017, and September 2019 to April 2020.

The preliminary fieldwork coincided with my MA programme at SOAS, where I had the opportunity to visit Nepal as an exchange student affiliated with Kathmandu University's School of Art. This visit marked my first introduction to the country. My aims were twofold: to delineate my MA dissertation topic and gather relevant resources, and informally, to immerse myself in the Nepali experience as a tourist. Surprisingly, my position as a long-term Chinese resident in Nepal unveiled the complex Chinese communities within the country, sparking my interest in exploring the underlying power dynamics.

While my fieldwork from 2016 to 2017 does not directly contribute data to this thesis, I regard it as pivotal scouting research that prepared me for the subsequent, more in-depth fieldwork. This phase essentially shaped my research interests and provided me with a fundamental understanding of activities within the Nepal-China contact zone. The two fieldwork periods are interconnected through personal relationships, emotional ties, and evolving events. For instance, some key informants who offered invaluable insights for this thesis were first encountered during the preliminary fieldwork. Furthermore, conducting fieldwork at different times enabled me to observe the long-term impacts and transformations stemming from specific events. Even though my physical presence in Nepal was limited, my continuous attention and observation of the contact zone were maintained via various channels.

In September 2019, I 'returned' to Nepal to formally conduct fieldwork for this thesis. Guided by my understanding that the Chinese presence in Nepal is a complex social construct intertwined with many aspects of Nepali society, rather than a fixed external entity imposed upon it, I primarily used qualitative research methods for my investigation. These methods allow for an in-depth exploration of relationships, behaviours, and the processes of events within varied social and natural settings, providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between phenomena, people, and meaning (Shank, 2006). They circumvent the need for

intensive statistical analysis (Barbour, 2014: 55) and illuminate the subjective meaning, actions, and context of those being researched (Fossey et al., 2002). During my fieldwork, I employed historical-ethnographic methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations (in Chinese, Nepali, and English). Generally, interacting with various people in their own contexts provided grounded, empirical experience for situational analysis, aligning with the overarching task of this thesis.

These situations, embodying a matrix of historicity, social relations, and materiality, often manifest as distinct places, or research sites. In these sites, I conducted in situ observations, participated in activities, and interacted with various informants. Due to the multifunctionality of these places and their diverse meanings for different actors, it is challenging to neatly categorise them. However, for the reader's convenience, I provide a rough list of the primary field sites, which include compounds of Chinese expatriates, Chinese restaurants, hostels, tourist epicentres, and monasteries. These different sites and my methods of access, participation, and connection between them will be elaborated further in the subsequent section.

As previously mentioned, my initial fieldwork provided a rudimentary understanding of the Chinese presence in Nepal. However, merely knowing where to find these places did not equate to genuine access. Initial attempts to secure access through introducing myself and my work often proved unsuccessful, as my academic objectives did not spark the interest of many, particularly Chinese individuals who prioritised their own business ventures. This led me to the realisation that to gain meaningful access, I needed to associate myself with a specific locale, reflecting identity, resources, and power dynamics, which are intricately intertwined within the contact zone.

My 'place', if I may refer to it as such, is an expatriate compound of a Chinese state-owned infrastructure enterprise. Access was facilitated by my family connections; specifically, the company director is a close friend of my father-in-law. This relationship bestowed a degree of privilege upon me in the compound. I easily obtained research permission from the compound's gatekeeper and had extensive access to almost all areas and activities within. I spent considerable time observing, interacting with, and interviewing the compound's residents. My identity as a researcher was openly disclosed, and in spite of the gatekeeper's permission, I explained my role and objectives to the residents and obtained their consent.

In such a setting where the boundary between work and personal life is blurred, obtaining consent is an ongoing process of normalising my presence and repeatedly confirming and adjusting my role. My strategy was to establish myself as a recognised member of the compound before initiating formal inquiries. This often involved stepping out of my private space to participate in collective activities such as group dining, playing card games, hanging out, and having casual conversations with various residents. Proving useful to people proved to be an effective way to gain acceptance. Additionally, maintaining a low profile, not causing trouble, and refraining from making personal requests - in essence, respecting the power hierarchy of the compound rather than challenging it - was another crucial strategy.

As I felt ready to initiate formal inquiries, I opted for a situational approach, exploring questions in a scattered yet interconnected manner. In comparison, I conducted fewer purposeful semi-structured interviews within the compound. Initially, I attempted to ask questions using a semi-structured interview method, but I quickly discovered many residents were uncomfortable with my transition from the amicable 'Yang Junior' to 'Yang the Researcher'. Therefore, I began to keep records of questions of interest and would pose them to people during everyday activities. This approach often meant that the timing and location of my inquiries were pertinent. Moreover, it necessitated a sensitivity towards improvisation, as many valuable questions emerged unexpectedly, making consistent reconfirmation of consent essential. This blend of participant observation and interview methodology was largely employed in my investigations at other sites.

My identity as a compound resident substantially aided in expanding my network to other places, and these connections further extended my reach. To counterbalance the potential for a singular, homogenous experience that may be caused by the snowball sampling technique, I strove to maintain diversity in these places. Importantly, the development of this research network was just one of many trajectories I experienced during the fieldwork. As I will detail in subsequent chapters, several unexpected events further complicated these networks.

In conjunction with my ethnographically oriented research, I also focused on the analysis of cultural products, specifically online travelogues and Vlogs. Online travelogues often consist of multimedia combinations of text, images, animations, videos, and audio. Most of the travelogues analysed for this thesis were collated with the assistance of an internet data scraping tool. Consequently, all the travelogues (unless specified otherwise) analysed were

sourced from the Chinese internet, meaning the creators and consumers of the content are predominantly Chinese. Relevant travelogues were collected from Mafengwo (http://www.mafengwo.cn/), one of the most frequented tourist information-sharing platforms on the Chinese internet.

Data collection occurred on 7th May 2020. Travelogues were extracted using the keyword 'Nepal' (Ch. niboer) from the online platform. This search yielded a total of 257 entries. After converting the data to Excel spreadsheets, the following information was available: Article Title, Cover Picture, Uploading Time, Number of Reads, Number of Favourites, Number of Shares, Number of Likes, Relevant Destinations, Travel Dates, Travelling Period, Travel Companions, Average Expense, and Page Link. Upon closer inspection of these entries, I found no invalid data in terms of duplicates, non-original content, or empty fields. From the total 257 entries, I selected the fifteen articles with the highest number of reads for further analysis.

A similar method was adopted to compile an archive of Vlogs. I used a data scraping tool to amass Vlogs from Bilibili (https://www.bilibili.com), a leading hub for user-generated content in Chinese cyberspace. Since 2018, Bilibili has played a pivotal role in professionalizing, institutionalizing, and commercializing Vlogs in mainland China (Wang, 2022). Data collection was conducted on 7th May 2020 using the same keyword. This search resulted in a file comprising 1,000 videos, which I subsequently converted into an Excel spreadsheet. The following information was extracted: Video Length, Title, Date and Time of Uploading, Number of Views, Bullet Commentary Counts, Virtual Coin Counts, Favourite Counts, Like Counts, HTML Address, Brief Introduction, Hashtags, User Names, and Follower Counts. After data cleaning through Excel to remove videos that were not travel Vlogs about Nepal, I was left with 431 Vlogs. The twenty videos with the highest number of views were selected for further analysis. In addition, several representative videos with fewer views were also included for specific case studies. Beyond Bilibili, I also followed several Nepal-based Vloggers on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) for long-term observations.

My approach to these online cultural artefacts transitioned through two stages. Initially, I aimed to analyse these digital artefacts for their representative function, examining how Nepal was collectively and variably portrayed within them by close reading. However, this approach shifted with the advent of the pandemic, when both my informants and I were physically immobilised, leading to the adoption of digital ethnography methods. This pivot represents a

transformation from the classic ethnographic emphasis on "being there" (Hannerz, 2003) and activities such as browsing, following posts, and transitioning between platforms (Hine, 2007), to "seeing with" (Waltorp, 2020) and living with these digital cultural artefacts. Hence, these digital resources became integral in my attempt to comprehensively understand the complexity of individual and collective experiences and practices that are both multi-situated and multi-scalar (Zani, 2020: 807).

Researchers broadly agree that online spaces are not distinctly segregated from physical spaces, effectively making it impossible to disentangle online spaces from tangible, material, offline spaces (Hallett and Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015, 2000; James and Busher, 2015; Miller and Slater, 2000; Ward, 1999). Consequently, my exploration of an online community is not confined to its 'virtual' locations and "cannot be disentangled from its physical and material counterparts" (Zani, 2020: 808). While the notion of virtual space might suggest a uniform, boundless realm of unrestricted movement, it is inextricably connected to the distinct features, political structures, and histories of specific localities or regions. As such, I have chosen to pursue an ethnographic investigation of the continuities and discontinuities between the experienced realities of face-to-face interactions and the socialities associated with social media activity (Postill and Pink, 2012: 123-124).

The shift in my research methods was motivated by a reassessment of my epistemological stance, compelling me to critically examine my positionality and research objectives. During my fieldwork, my informants would frequently ask, "What is in it for me?" This question provoked me to consider how I, as a PhD researcher based at a European university, could effectively engage with my informants. It forced me to reflect on whether my work truly catered to their interests and agendas. Further, it made me question how I could work alongside them, recognising their perspectives as legitimate knowledge instead of merely raw data.

These reflections further inspired me to adopt a multimodal toolkit. This approach not only broadens the research landscape, providing a more diverse array of tools and practices to understand varied social and cultural experiences (Westmoreland, 2022), but also promotes a more public, collaborative, and politically engaged approach to research (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón, 2019). By asking these questions, I aimed to move away from traditional research models towards a more participatory and equitable paradigm, where the voices of my informants are given the space and respect they deserve.

Thesis Contribution

This thesis is arguably the first comprehensive and rigorous academic study in any language that scrutinises the Chinese presence in Nepal across time and space. Its primary contributions lie within the following areas of scholarship.

Firstly, it enhances the complexity of existing Nepali Studies by capturing and analysing the Chinese presence in Nepal as a trans-local response to asymmetrical globalisation. Despite the seamless integration of the Chinese presence into many facets of local society, relevant discussions largely remain within the confines of mass media. This leaves systematic and updated academic discourse on the Chinese presence in Nepal or Nepal-China relations underdeveloped. On the most basic level, this thesis provides an update on recent significant developments in Nepali society.

By refreshing this information, the thesis offers rich descriptions of various actors' practices in the dynamic field of Nepal-China relations, which has traditionally been dominated by state-to-state cooperation rhetoric. The introduction of updated personal experiences and consideration of interrelated processes across different dimensions contribute fresh findings and arguments that challenge conventional understandings of Nepal-China relations. Consequently, it addresses calls for a "nonstatist perspective" (Sen, 2021: 380) to deconstruct Nepal and China as singular entities and reinterpret them as entangled entities, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the multi-layered and multifaceted nature of Nepal-China relations.

The proposition to employ a framework that acknowledges transcultural nuances for reimagining Nepal and Nepali Studies is two-fold and centres on comparability. By reconceptualising Nepali Studies through the lens of Nepal-China contact, this thesis offers mid-range (Houben, 2020) theories and methods for re-examining Nepal in relation to its contacts with other non-Western countries. It invites comparative perspectives from, for example, Nepal-India, Nepal-Japan, or Nepal-Thailand interactions, to enrich the pool of insights and suggest additional interpretations. This experimental approach from the trans-Himalayan region also contributes to the broader discussion of Area Studies, particularly within the Asian context. Engaging with the ongoing debate on Area Studies' challenges and potential

resolutions, this thesis echoes Hutt's (2019) emphasis on the importance of knowledge of "somewhere," and underscores the significant roles local inter-Asian perspectives, ideas, histories, materials, languages, and movements (or lack thereof) play as valid research interests. Additionally, this decolonisation experiment within a specific Asian context offers valuable insights into understanding the complexities between (de)colonisation, knowledge production, and people's everyday lives as battlegrounds of oppression and resistance.

One last contribution made by this thesis, though less academic but deeply tied to the individuals in the contact zone, deserves mention. During my fieldwork, I was frequently asked how my research project might benefit those involved. Regrettably, I did not have a satisfactory answer, a failure that has remained with me ever since. Many of the Nepali and Chinese people I encountered during my fieldwork are marginalised, resource-poor, and often exploited. Their transient, lingering, and alien statuses are a constant presence. Their happiness and misfortune, struggles and exploitation are subtly concealed under potent notions such as the earthly paradise, development, modernity, and globalisation. Nevertheless, they demonstrate remarkable resilience and creativity, seeking opportunities from each other, pursuing their envisioned happiness, and justifying and (re)affirming their positions within various societies. Their courage and resilience inspire my work. While I understand that a PhD thesis alone may not substantially benefit them, I sincerely hope that by sharing the stories, emotions, and experiences of some Asian agents with a broader audience, this thesis can contribute, even if modestly, to exposing and potentially altering well-packaged asymmetrical power dynamics.

Thesis chapter division

Including this introductory chapter, this thesis comprises nine chapters. Chapter Two delves into the cultural ties between Nepal and China, emphasising their mutual historical contexts. Instead of merely chronicling historical events, this chapter underscores the process of transculturation as illustrated through the notion of "Transhimalayan complexity." This necessitates a rigorous scrutiny of historical resources, interpretations, the development of the Nepal-China contact zone's history, and the diverse influences—including religious and colonial forces—that have moulded it. While this chapter acknowledges trans-Asian historical narratives, it concurrently remains critically attuned to the enduring colonial influences on contemporary Asian nations, contesting traditional accounts of cultural exchanges. The study

specifically investigates the intricacies of framing a mutual history between Nepal and China against the backdrop of (de)colonialism in the 20th century.

Chapter Three, though concise, sets the stage for understanding present-day Nepal-China direct interactions and pivotal concepts like flow and low-end globalisation. It challenges the superficial, undiluted, and independent conceptualisation of trans-Himalayan engagements. Instead, it suggests that empirical, experiential, hybrid forms of interactions, encapsulated as "globalisation from below," offer a more insightful re-envisioning of the contact zone's milieu.

Chapters Four to Six probe the issues of representation and associated power dynamics in the Nepal-China contact zone. The fourth chapter, focusing on contemporary Chinese online travelogues, elucidates how the enduring Orientalist view of the Himalayan region, notably Shangri-la, is manifested, disseminated, and redefined in these narratives, thereby becoming a dominant representation.

Chapter Five centres on online Vlogs, portraying how what is Shangri-la for Chinese tourists, has been represented as an unmodernised and undeveloped model in this type of media. Beyond mere representational analysis and eschewing moral judgments, both the third and fourth chapters regard these cultural products as innovative, multifaceted knowledge sources deserving their own validation, intricately connected with their intricated cultural, political and social routes and the subjectivities of involved stakeholders.

The sixth chapter adopts a nuanced approach, examining the gendered visual representations of the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Ambassador Hou Yanqi, in her diplomatic endeavours. Recognising them as a confluence of gender, representation, tourism, and state relations, this chapter unravels Nepal's attempts to navigate and confront the skewed power dynamics of the contact zone through embracing, rejecting, or (re)crafting specific Chinese representations.

The seventh chapter aims to discern how imbalanced power structures in the contact zone materialise, solidify, evolve, and are contested. It ventures into the stationary facets of the contact zone, investigating various spatial and material contexts. In its culmination, this chapter delves into the lived experiences within interconnected locales in Kathmandu: the urban enclave of Thamel, a compound governed by a Chinese State-owned Enterprise, and a trans-

local *minsu* (guesthouse). Each serves as a nexus wherein the intricacies of power disparity are evident.

Chapter Eight offers a comprehensive ethnographic exploration of Chinese individual traders and their role in the circulation of medical products between Nepal and China, both pre- and post-pandemic. This inquiry reveals the convoluted networks they traverse, their underlying motivations, the inventive methods they adopt, and the challenges they face.

The conclusion commences by addressing the 'failure' to decolonise the complex knowledge networks associated with Nepal. Rather than portraying this 'failure' as a passive acceptance of enduring coloniality, it is perceived as an inaugural phase of epistemological decolonisation. Building upon this, the chapter posits that emergent technologies, motivations, values, spaces, and actors are shaping novel paradigms of trans-Himalayan engagement. These models, exemplified by Jade's narrative—the concluding story of this thesis—are more rooted, participatory, compassionate, and cooperative. Such multifaceted empirical perspectives necessitate a reorientation of the academic discourse in Nepali Studies.

Chapter Two Mediated History and Imagined Solidarity

In a thesis designed to systematise the cultural relations between Nepal and China, it is essential to dedicate some space to a discussion on the historical context of the two nations. This chapter sets out to accomplish this task by examining the shared past of Nepal and China, which is believed to date back as far as the fourth century. According to some Buddhist historiographies, the inception of their shared history could extend even further back. Nevertheless, this chapter aims to present the historical backdrop, investigating how past interactions have influenced contemporary manifestations.

The aim of this chapter, however, is to do more than merely recount historical facts. Rather, it strives to uncover the historical process of transculturation, echoing what Axel Michaels (2019) terms "Transhimalayan complexity." This concept is also encompassed in Nepali historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi's (1971) inquiry: "One wonders, however, to what extent these efforts have made the problems and challenges faced by our ancestors comprehensible and meaningful to the present generation." Indeed, how should we interpret the raw texts written by ancient Chinese monks who saw Nepal through Buddhist worldviews, which were not universally understood? How should we approach elements whose meanings were transformed during the trans-Himalayan process? How were these historical materials, now considered credible evidence, viewed by their contemporaneous audiences? How has the history of the Nepal-China contact zone been constructed, by whom, using whose historiography, and via which channels? By posing these questions and attempting to answer them, this chapter does not intend to deconstruct the established historical narrative of the contact zone, although later sections will identify several shortcomings within this narrative. More broadly, this chapter aims to disclose how the contact zone's history has been mediated by various forms of power, including religious, imperial, colonial, and national actors. This work is emancipatory, liberating the contact zone's historiography from a Eurocentric framework by revealing the problematic coexistence of multiple non-Western trajectories of knowledge production between pre-modern Nepal and China. This approach allows us to move beyond familiar accounts of cultural encounters and exchanges, particularly for Nepal, regarded as one of the world's most 'remote' places, and to explore diverse methods of global interconnectivity.

While acknowledging the value of specific trans-Asian, locally produced historical accounts, this chapter does not solely focus on the potential decolonising functions of these alternative histories. It adopts a cautious stance towards decolonising aspirations and recognises that the

modern political sovereignty of Asian states like Nepal and China does not guarantee cultural independence or a complete eradication of colonial influences. Since the early twentieth century, particularly around the mid-century, constructing a shared past between modern Nepal and China has served as a vital means of envisioning pre- and post-colonial solidarity. However, as this chapter will later discuss, knowledge production collaboration in the Global South has consistently been affected by power dynamics from the North via mechanisms such as mediating translations, supplying knowledge sources, and authorising knowledge. Consequently, this chapter also explores what happens when one colonised group attempts to unite in solidarity with another colonised group but must do so through the coloniser's language, and how the pre-modern friendship between two neighbouring Asian countries is entangled with imperialist traces.

The Agnostic Place of Nepal in Pre-modern China's *Tianxia* System and Geographic Tradition

Figure 1 huang qing zhi gong tu collected in BnF, accessed on 16th January 2020

"**Balebu Headman and his Servant**

Also called Gurkha, the *Balebu* are another tribe of *E'natekeke* Hindustan. They are located to the west of posterior Tibet, approximately 20,000 li away from the capital. Of old their territory

contained four tribes. One was called *Yangbu*, one was called *Guokamu*, one was called *Yiling*, and one was called *Mugong*. Now these tribes have been united for the first time by the Gurkhas. In the fifty-fourth year of the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1789), they sent two headmen, *Balapadu'erkawasi* and *Halisaye*, as envoys.

It is their custom to worship the Buddha. They wrap their heads with red silk. Their clothing is also made of silk. To worship Buddha, they rub a dot of incense on their foreheads, the diameter of which is about one inch, to show their sincerity and respect. They have city walls and houses just like in the interior. They mostly have rice paddy fields. They also produce coral, turquoise, gold, silver, otter, and other goods. Their people are extremely skillful. Many of them go to Tibet to trade and to work as craftsmen." (Hostetler and Wu ed., 2022: 117)

The aforementioned entry is derived from Qing Imperial Illustrations of Tributary Peoples (Ch. *huang qing zhi gong tu*; 1790; henceforth referred to as Imperial Illustration), providing a description of a chieftain and his servant who visited the Qing court from *Balebu*. This entry also allocates some space to depict *Balebu's* religious practices, customs, architecture, and products. *Balebu*, as hinted by the content of the entry, is also identified as the land of the Gurkhas, the tribe that dominated three other tribes. Why was the land of the Gurkhas known to the Chinese emperor as *Balebu*? The answer is not explicitly detailed in the entry. However, as per the entry's records, in 1789, the Gurkhas dispatched two envoys to the Qing court, an event that became a significant source for composing this entry into the Imperial Illustration.

Before I delve into the analysis of the entry's relationship with the Imperial Illustration, let me draw attention to another historical event that transpired approximately a year before the Nepali envoys' visit to the Qing court. In 1788, a conflict arose between the Gurkhas and Tibetans, quickly involving the Qing court, which dispatched an expeditionary force to expel the Gurkhas from the empire's southwestern borders. The triggers and progression of the war have been extensively documented in numerous primary historical sources and studied by many scholars[3].

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[3] For a comprehensive discussion of the Nepali-Tibet Wars, please refer to *qinding balebu jilue* (Ji ed., 2006a), qinding kuo'er ka jilue (Ji ed., 2006b), Regmi (1961), Theobald (2020), Mosca (2013), and Boulnois (Boulnois, 1989).

Here, I will concentrate on how the war reshaped Qing China's geographic knowledge of the Himalayan area. Upon receiving reports from Tibet, indicating the Gurkhas crossing the borders and requesting assistance from Beijing, the emperor and his high-level ministers demonstrated a peculiar ignorance of their southern neighbour. They were uncertain about the identity of the invaders and their location. It is documented (Ji ed., 2006) that the Emperor's Grand Councillor Heshen learnt that a Tibetan Lama residing in the Tashilhunpo Monastery had visited *Balebu* years earlier. Consequently, he consulted the Lama. Besides informing the Grand Councillor about *Balebu's* rough geographic location, architecture, religions, products, and military conflicts with neighbouring countries, the Lama also updated Heshen on *Balebu's* recent regime change, mentioning for the first time that the Gorkha, or *Kuo'er ka* tribe, had occupied *Balebu*. This incident might represent the first time that the Himalayan kingdom captured serious attention from the court in Beijing. It also highlighted a typical mediated approach through which knowledge was acquired and transmitted across the Himalayan mountains in history. Transculturation never occurs in a vacuum; it necessitates channels, translators, and carriers. The 1788 Nepali-Tibetan War ended in what could be termed a 'win-win' situation, with both parties claiming victory. A significant impact of the war was the establishment of direct, albeit limited and unstable, communication channels between Gorkhaland and the Qing court. The rulers of the Himalayan kingdom agreed to send a tribute embassy to Beijing (Mosca, 2013). It is unclear whether the chieftain and his servant are the envoys dispatched following the post-war agreement. Nevertheless, using them as models and incorporating the *Balebu* entry into the Imperial Illustration implies a form of direct intelligence gathering between Nepal and China in the eighteenth century.

However, as the entry suggests, despite the presence of direct communication, the knowledge produced was still heavily mediated through the Tibetan lens. Moreover, the cultural lens through which the informational knowledge was filtered also includes Manchu and Mongolian elements, as it is indicated that *Balebu* was another tribe of *E'natekeke* Hindustan. The term *E'natekeke* Hindustan is the Manchu name for India, derived from Mongolian (Hostetler & Wu, 2022). These multicultural mediators shaped Qing China's knowledge of Nepal into a transcultural mixture whose formation depends more on mediated transformative trajectories rather than intelligence directly stemming, collected, and received from one end. In this case, it is speculated that the Gorkhaland known to the Qing court is not, at least not predominantly, composed of information pieces collected from more reliable informants, like envoys and prisoners of war, but from multilingual indirect sources with various worldviews and

geographic knowledge systems, which logically should be problematic. Why, one may ask, would Qing China prefer seemingly more complex answers over seemingly more convenient ones? Moreover, why would the Qianlong emperor and the empire's extensive and sophisticated networks of intelligence, under the control of his intelligent and resourceful ministers, know almost nothing about a bordering neighbour? Can such ignorance be translated into understanding that before 1788, the Himalayan kingdom and China had never communicated?

Figure 2 The Map of Five India in the Western Land (Ch. xi tu wu yin zhi tu) (Zhi Pan ed., c.a 1269, cited by Geng, (1991: 234-235); my marks)

To unravel these puzzles, I turn to a map. This map, which presents geographic data corresponding to areas roughly equivalent to modern Central and South Asia, is contained in the Buddhist chronicle *Fo Zu Tong Ji*, compiled by the Chinese Buddhist monk Zhi Pan in the 13th century. According to the map's inscription, it was produced by Zhi Pan (or an actual cartographer) based on the texts of "The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions" (Ch. *Da Tang Xi Yu Ji*), penned by another notable Chinese monk, Xuan Zang, from the 7th century. This map, along with two others found in the same volume, constitutes a set that portrays China and regions in Central, West, and South Asia within a Buddhist world.

On this map, Nepal (marker 1; Ch. *Niboluo*), not *Balebu* or the land of the Gurkhas as the Chinese would understand more than five centuries later, is clearly marked in the represented Buddhist world. On the map, Nepal is located almost in the centre of the five India in the Western land, close to the most important places in the Buddhist world (mark 2). These include Kapilavastu, the birthplace of Buddha (Ch. *Jia Wei Wei Fo Sheng Di*), Sarnath in Varanasi (Ch. *Bo Luo Nai Lu Ye Yuan*), Salavana in Kusinagara (Ch. *Ju Shi Na Sha Luo Lin*), Nalanda (Ch. *Na Lan Tuo Si*), and Rajagaha in Magadha (Ch. *Mo Jie Ti Wang She Cheng*).

Hence, the final question posited earlier can be conclusively answered: communication between ancient Nepal and China predates the 18th century significantly, and pertinent knowledge was created and preserved. It is logical to assume that the Qianlong emperor, his ministers, and intelligence officers could have accessed this knowledge. Even though the name of the land had evolved from *Ni Bo Luo* to *Balebu*, the empire's elites should not have had a problem connecting the two after cross-referencing. In other words, why was the name *Ni Bo Luo* abandoned, or why was its influence diminished, or even suppressed?
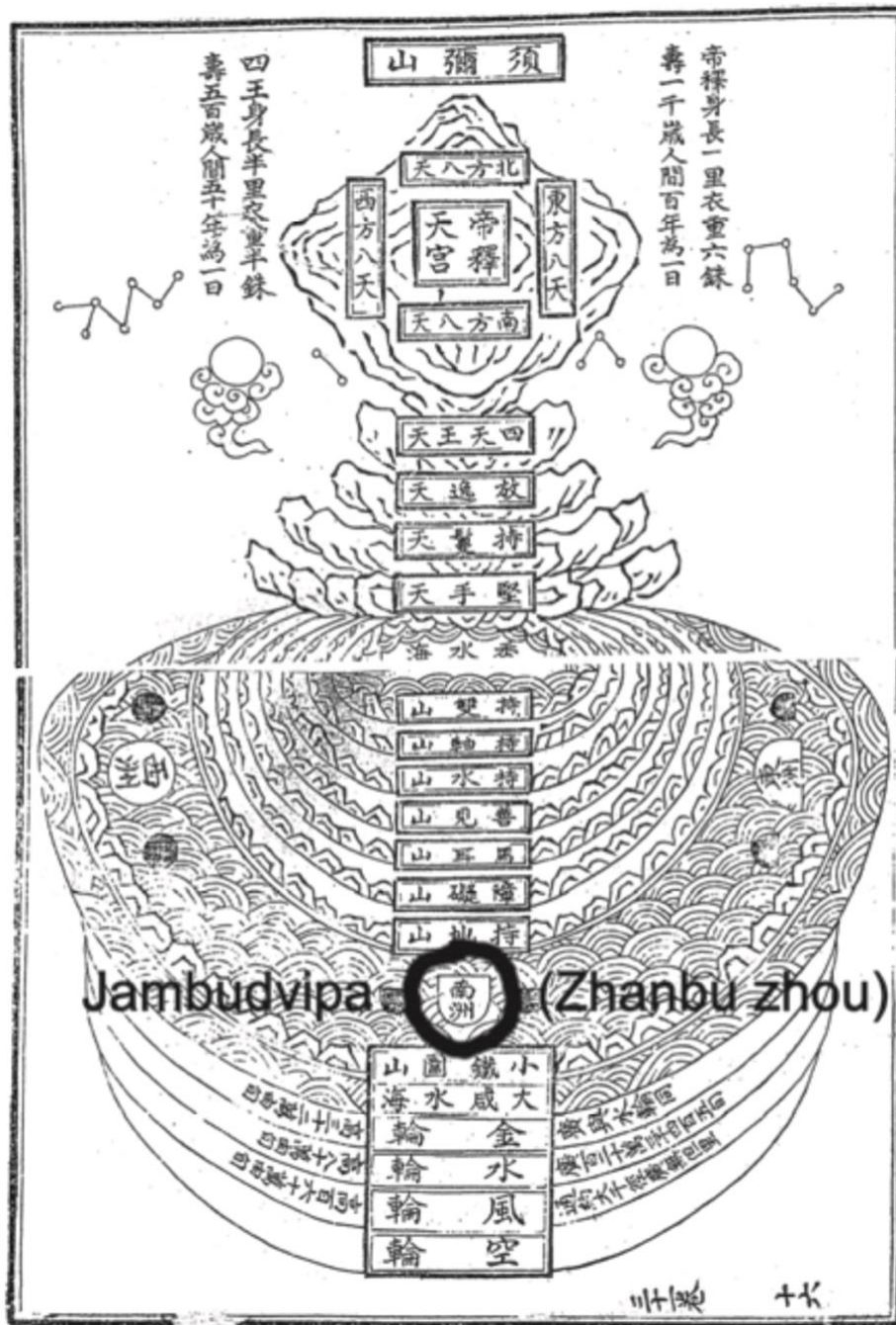
Figure 3 Map of the Entire Universe (Ch. san qian da qian shi jie tu; cited in Park (2010: 58))

The second map in Zhi Pan's Buddhist chronicle might provide insight into this question. This map displays a part of Buddhist cosmology, focusing on Mount Meru and Jambudvipa, the human world. It shows portions of Jambudvipa related to China (Ibid). As such, while Nepal is portrayed in this map, it resides within a Buddhist context rather than a secular one. The representation of Nepal within this Buddhist world might not directly correlate with its secular geographical information, and is subject to various interpretations.

Shifting the focus back to the Imperial Illustrations, *Huang Qing Zhi Gong Tu* was first commissioned in 1751 by the Qianlong emperor. This collection includes ethnic groups within Qing China and foreign nationalities that had already established relations with Qing. Descriptions of these groups, in both Chinese and Manchu, include their origins, customs, and clothing, and sometimes outline their relationship to the Qing empire. As such, it is lauded as "a cultural map" allowing the Qianlong emperor to survey his realm and those who recognised his sovereignty (Hostetler, 2007: 124, 126). Lai Yuzhi (2012) further argues that the Imperial Illustrations serve as a visual representation of the traditional *Tianxia* system, where foreign nationalities and ethnic groups are hierarchically arranged around China, with Beijing at the centre. In this way, the emperor could demonstrate the vast territory of his empire and fix each member's position in the empire in the way of an index.

Scholars like Hostetler and Lai have centred their analyses on the traditional worldview of Chinese culture throughout history, and how the Imperial Illustrations serve as a visual manifestation of this worldview. This worldview, known as the *Tianxia* or "all-under-heaven" system, implies that the entire universe is a harmonious entity. However, this harmony does not stem from a decentralised pattern focusing on individuality. Instead, it follows a hierarchical structure, with China and the Emperor, the "son of heaven," perceived to be at the world's centre. Other countries and peoples are arranged around this central point in concentric circles, with those more influenced by Chinese culture positioned in inner circles, and those less sinicised placed in the middle or outer circles (see Carlson, 2011; Gong, 1984; Zhao, 1997).

This hierarchy's boundaries are culturally divided based on Confucian doctrines. Countries and peoples heavily influenced by Chinese culture, such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, were considered civilised and thus belonged to the inner circle. Those considered barbarians, in the sense of being less sinicised, fell into the middle or outer circles. These boundaries were flexible and could be easily crossed. Zhang and Buzan (2012: 14) describe this system as one where "'uncivilized' barbarians could become 'civilized' barbarians, if they are willing to be 'transformed'". This rigid dichotomy in Imperial China's conceptualisation of its relationship with other peoples reflects "a system of co-existence between the Chinese and the non-Chinese world in full compliance with the Confucian assumptions of cosmic harmony."

The notion of cosmic harmony in ancient international politics was embodied in a complex tributary system. This system was mainly developed during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, from

the 14th to the late 19th century (Zhao, 2015: 963). Serving as a real-world manifestation of the *Tianxia* worldview, the tributary system made concrete the abstract concepts of civilisation and barbarism. It allowed various political actions to determine hierarchical positions in international society, with countries not engaged in these performances or not recognised remaining in a limbo-like state. As Zhao (1997: 19) puts it, "all countries within the tributary system were subservient to China, and those… too distant to participate simply lived in a kind of limbo or international political vacuum." The tributary system was inherently elastic, sharing the flexibility of the circles' boundaries in the *Tianxia* worldview. It was by "no means a rigid mode of behaviour or a unilaterally imposed status quo, but instead a complex and dynamic diplomatic phenomenon" (Zhou, 2011: 178). "Variations in the institutional practices... are the norm rather than an exception or deviation" (Zhang & Buzan 2012: 24).

In the context of Qing China, Nepal was among those countries in limbo, and their relationship embodied a complex cluster of transcultural dynamics. The emperor and his ministers' interests in the Himalayan neighbour were largely military-oriented. It was not until the addition to the Imperial Illustrations that Nepal's semi-agnostic status was partially removed from Qing China's worldview. Even then, the *Balebu* entry's position in the Imperial Illustrations' hierarchical system suggests its lower rank and marginal position within Qing China's tributary system.

The completion of the Imperial Illustrations spanned many years. After the Qianlong Emperor's death, his successor, the Jiaqing Emperor, continued to update the empire's cultural map. It is speculated (Lai, 2012) that the addition of the *Balebu* entry was completed in 1790, marking the last amendment during the Qianlong reign. This addition placed the *Balebu* entry alongside entries for Tibet and affiliated tribes, indicating its semi-civilised status from Qing China's perspective and its peripheral position in the spreading circles of Confucian culture. Its dependence on the Tibetan cluster suggests that its geographic and cultural information was only detectable in relation to Tibet.

Even more telling, the entry suggests that the people of *Balebu* were more 'uncivilised' barbarians compared to the Tibetans. The entry preceding *Balebu* describes the *Lukapuzha* tribe as "dull and obstinate, and [they] do not know anything about Buddhism. Men and women wear animal skins in the winter and tree leaves in the summer. They catch all kinds of poisonous insects for food. They do not go to Tibet." (Hostetler & Wu, 2019: 115). By placing Nepal after

Lukapuzha in this meticulously designed hierarchical structure, the composers intended to dissolve it into the empire's Tibetan frontier as an unimportant, inferior member[4].

Certainly, the stark contrast between the secular Confucian worldview encapsulated in the Imperial Illustrations and the spiritual Buddhist perspective represented in Zhi Pan's map of Five India brings to light the complex and often incompatible knowledge systems at play. Each of these perspectives was the product of different intellectual actors who operated within their own distinct networks, each pursuing their own agendas, often at odds with one another. The traditional Chinese literati, for example, dismissed Buddhist accounts of the world as excessively miraculous and therefore unsuitable for serious investigation (Mosca, 2013: 43). On the other hand, Chinese monks, including Zhi Pan, were equally critical of Confucian and Daoist worldviews, which they saw as narrow-minded and dismissive (Park, 2010).

Compounding this issue was the hierarchical division of labour within the traditional Chinese system of producing geographic knowledge, which further contributed to what has been termed "geographic agnosticism" (Mosca, 2013: 39). In this system, the Confucian literati monopolised the production of geographic knowledge. They heavily relied on text-based investigation and displayed a suspicious, however, generally tolerant attitude towards geographic information. These factors led to the creation of a multitude of diverse, and occasionally contradictory, interpretations of the world. Meanwhile, other actors, such as Buddhist monks, sailors, tradesmen, prisoners of war, soldiers of expedition, and explorers, carried out hands-on geographic exploration and provided more direct information. However, despite their first-hand experience and contributions, they held little discursive power in the system of geographic knowledge production. Their records were typically not taken seriously as sources of geographic knowledge and were preserved merely for the sake of completeness (Mosca, 2013).

Furthermore, the Buddhist records, which spanned over a thousand years, were anything but consistent. They represent a complex array of interpretations, with variations in names, presentations, and structures, all influenced by a multitude of political, cultural and social

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[4] The question of whether Nepal's membership in China's tributary system was acknowledged by its rulers or to what extent, and whether there was a clear mutual understanding regarding this concept between Nepal and China, remains subject to debate. The intricacy of this matter has been extensively investigated by several scholars, such as Manandhar (2004, 2001) and Michaels (2019).

factors. Different place names such as *Lin'er guo*, *Jia wei luo*, and *Ni po luo*, all found in ancient Chinese Buddhist records, refer to regions within the contemporary boundaries of Nepal. However, it remains challenging to understand the exact geographic locations these names referred to, how Chinese monks developed their knowledge about these places, what motivated them, and how they understood the variations in these names.

In the next section, I will delve deeper into these issues, analysing records about Nepal left by Buddhist monks like Fa Xian and Xuan Zang. I aim to uncover how the multifaceted and often conflicting knowledge production about Nepal was shaped by the coexistence, challenges, and negotiations of various mediators. This exploration will provide a clearer picture of the complex and chaotic landscape of traditional Chinese knowledge production about Nepal.

Dozens of Nepals-several examples

The sub-title of this section is indeed inspired by A. K. Ramanujan's influential essay, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" (2004). Like Ramanujan's exploration of the Hindu epic through various cultural lenses, this thesis examines the numerous versions of Nepal through the lens of ancient Chinese knowledge systems. However, instead of addressing issues of translation, we follow Ramanujan's insight that through this examination, one can reveal a "unique crystallization, a new text with a unique texture and a fresh context" (ibid: 158). This perspective allows us to view the historical accounts of Nepal not as singular narratives but as a plethora of independent yet interconnected texts. Each of these 'texts' or accounts, primarily composed by ancient Chinese monks, resides within its unique semi-agnostic worldview, representing a distinctive transcultural trajectory. Rather than evolving chronologically or systematically, these trajectories, shaped by monks' knowledge and activities over hundreds of years and navigating between Buddhist and secular worldviews, often exist in isolation from each other, resulting in a complex tapestry of differing accounts of Nepal. These unique versions of Nepal, separated by the barriers of time, space, and worldview, form a diverse and intricate historical narrative.

It is only in the early twentieth century that modern Western historiography started bringing these unique 'texts' together, attempting to provide a more coherent and unified account of Nepal's history. The historical records related to modern Nepal, which often appear as brief paragraphs or single words, are scattered across numerous sources written and rewritten over

centuries. The efforts of modern scholars such as Levi (1967; 1989), Geng (1991), and Zhang (2018) have played a crucial role in systematising and categorising these fragmented materials. Their work has significantly facilitated the task of extracting Nepal-related texts from the vast expanse of Chinese historical materials. The following analysis will present selected texts and will not cover all available records. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive historical account of Nepal, but to explore how various historical forces have mediated the production of Chinese traditional knowledge about the Himalayan land, contributing to its inconsistency and semi-agnosticism.

> "Kingdom of *Lin'er* (Lumbini). The sacred literature of the Buddha says: The king of the kingdom begot the Buddha. The Buddha was heir-apparent. The name of his father was *xie tou ye* (Suddhodaua) his mother *Mo Ye* (Maya). The Buddha had his body and dress of yellow colour. The back of his neck was blue like a piece of blue silk, his breasts, blue, and his hair copper-red..." ((Zhao ed., 2008); the above translation from (Levi, 1967: 69); Chinese transliteration changed to contemporary style by me)

The excerpt above, as far as I know, is the earliest record in Chinese materials that can be connected with the land of contemporary Nepal. The Kingdom of *Lin'er*, or *Lin'er guo* in Chinese, is thought to refer to Lumbini in modern Nepal's Tarai. The original record of *Lin'er guo* is found in *Wei lüe*, *The Brief History of Wei* (c.a AC 239 to 265). The original text of *Wei lüe* is lost, but some condensed sections are referenced by Pei Songzhi in his *San guo zhi zhu* (c.a. AC 429), *Commentary on the Three Kingdoms' Records*, from the 5th century.

Notably, the account of *Lin'er guo*, including the narrative of the Buddha's birth and the initial spread of Buddhism to China, is recorded as a kingdom in *Wei lüe*, which appears to be a misinterpretation. In Buddhist sutras, Lumbini is a garden, not a kingdom. This error is believed to have originated from a spelling mistake in similar Chinese characters, and both Yu Huan, the author of *Wei lüe*, and Pei Songzhi, perhaps due to their lack of clarity about Buddhism, perpetuated the error[5]. This misunderstanding signifies a unique moment in the development

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[5] Fortunately, the impact of this misinterpretation was limited, as subsequent ancient Chinese monks recognized that it represented a garden rather than a kingdom. Additionally, the name Lumbini has been variously

of Buddhism in China and the norm in the process of transculturation, where Buddhism in China gradually became an unstable construct of infinite possibilities.

Although the time, routes, and propagators of Buddhism's introduction to China are still under debate, the text in which the account of *Lin'er guo* is contained hints that Buddhist texts were transmitted in the royal court as early as 2 BC (Shi, 2016). Over approximately two hundred years between Yu Huan's *Wei lüe* and Pei Songzhi's *san guo zhi zhu*, Buddhism experienced unprecedented development in China, and its existence began to depend less on various mysterious techniques as self-awareness gradually awakened. However, the adaptation of Buddhism in China required constant modification of its relationship with local cultural religions and the identification of suitable carriers and mediums. During this time, the orthodox Confucianism that had been dominant in China since the Han Dynasty started to weaken with the collapse of the dynasty itself, and metaphysics based on Daoism began to thrive among Chinese literati. This created a local cultural matrix for Buddhism, allowing it to proliferate among the scholar-official class and the common folk. Around the same period, sinicised stories about the birth of Buddha, which were entirely framed according to Chinese conceptions of time and geography, began circulating in China. These narratives significantly differed from the descriptions in Buddhist sutras (Law, 2003; Song, 1999; Tang, 2008).

The brief introduction above is not intended to clarify why the error of *Lin'er guo* occurred, but to demonstrate the unstable environment in which numerous cultural, political, and religious trajectories, sometimes even contradictory, mediated the knowledge production of Buddhism in China. For many Chinese Buddhist monks of the time, the instability and uncertainty of Buddhism's development in China were largely due to the asymmetry of authenticity, completeness, and institutionalisation concerning the reserves and understanding of original Buddhist materials between China and India. Buddhism needed not only to express itself through languages of local religions but also to navigate routes for its introduction and translation into China, which were heavily controlled by states like Tukhara, Parthia, Kirgiz, Sogdiana, Khotan, Kucha, and Kasmira (Xu, 2009). Moreover, the mediation of these states' agents was prevalent. This asymmetry, to a large extent, concretely materialised as an urgent movement to "secure certain canonical texts needed for the better understanding or practice of

transliterated into Chinese throughout history. For a comprehensive discussion on this topic, please refer to works by Levi (1967), Tang (2008), Chuan Yin (2000), and Grohmann (2016).

the religion at home" (Zürcher, 2007: 62). This need for canonical texts motivated an influential journey, which many modern scholars have symbolically and rhetorically constructed as the earliest evidence of Nepal-China interaction in history.

In AD 399, a senior Chinese Buddhist monk named Fa Xian embarked on a journey from *Chang'an* to *Tian zhu* (India) in search of authentic Buddhist materials, especially *Vinaya*, or Buddhist disciplines, in India to systematise Buddhist communities in China (see Shi, 2016). His travelogue, *Fo guo ji*, or *A Record of the Buddhist Kingdom*, contains a detailed description of Kapilavastu, the ancient capital of the Sakya tribe, authenticated by Fa Xian's on-site visit. This work connects Fa Xian to the discussion of Nepal-China relations and signifies the beginning of a profound journey that has come to symbolise the earliest evidence of Nepal-China interaction in history.

> "Less than a yojana to the east from this brought them to the city of Kapilavastu (*jia wei luo wei*); but in it there was neither king nor people. All was mound and desolation…At the spot where stood the old palace of King Suddhodana there have been made images of the prince (his eldest son) and his mother; and at the places where that son appeared mounted on a white elephant when he entered his mother womb, and where he turned his carriage round on seeing the sick man after he had gone out of the city by the eastern gate, topes have been erected…Fifty le east from the city was a garden, name Lumbini (*lun min yuan*), where the queen entered the pond and bathed. … The country of Kapilavastu is a great scene of empty desolation..." ((Fa Xian, 2008), the above translation from (Legge ed., 1886: 64-68))

One of the most apparent differences between Fa Xian's records and those of Yu Huan and Pei Songzhi is that in Fa Xian's account, Kapilavastu and Lumbini are clearly differentiated. The former refers to the city of Buddha's clan, while the latter represents a garden located outside the city. Fa Xian visited both places in person and also provided a more appropriate translation of Lumbini as *lun min yuan*, which adheres to transliteration while emphasising its status as a garden. It is almost impossible to ascertain whether Fa Xian knew of Yu Huan's record of *Lin'er guo* or whether Pei Songzhi was aware of Fa Xian's travelogues. However, my aim is not to prove that Yu Huan and Pei Songzhi made an amusing mistake due to ignorance, while Fa Xian

provided the correct answer. Rather, I am attempting to reveal the historical coexistence of various forms of knowledge about Buddhism, and possibly about the land that accommodates modern Nepal, produced by different mediators, through various routes, circulated in different circles, and supported by different worldviews. While some circles (e.g., Confucians) have demonstrated stronger powers over other circles (e.g., Buddhists), promoting and endorsing specific knowledge productions, they never completely erased the existence of knowledge, thus creating multiple authentic sources of information.

Even Fa Xian's single account in his travelogue does not present a unified worldview. A close reading of his accounts suggests Fa Xian's attempt to intertwine a Buddhist worldview with the political, cultural, and societal transformations in the secular world, and vice versa. For instance, as the excerpt above clearly indicates, when Fa Xian arrived in Kapilavastu, the city had long been deserted, and the kingdom had vanished from the secular world map. Fa Xian observed only ruins and a few people living on the land. Reading this account alone, one might interpret it as a recollection of this land's history. However, considering it along with other accounts suggests the coexistence of multiple worldviews supporting Fa Xian's travelogues. For example, in addition to recording places appearing in Buddhist sutras but no longer existent during Fa Xian's time, *fo go ji* also records countries, peoples, and institutes that existed during his time, with which he actually interacted. Importantly, the lines between past and present, as well as between legend and history, are not emphasised in Fa Xian's travelogues. His narration follows a linear, chronological, and consistent order, suggesting a movement happening within the same temporal-spatial matrix.

The same strategy of arranging the Buddhist and secular worlds within consistent temporal and spatial vectors is still clearly seen in the previously mentioned map, produced hundreds of years after Fa Xian. This strategy suggests a persistent conflict - a severe "borderland complex" (Sen, 2016: 12) - among ancient Chinese monks. This conflict is expressed through their unease regarding the incompatibility of the Buddhist worldview and the criticisms of local Confucian and Daoist thinkers. Where does China sit within the Buddhist world? What is the relationship between China and the Buddhist Kingdom? What are the relationships between China, the Buddhist Kingdom, and other parts of the world? These questions preoccupied the minds of ancient Chinese monks and spurred them to produce knowledge to legitimise their positions within the Buddhist world. Places like Kapilavastu became the nexus that connected these two kinds of worlds in their works.

This thesis raises additional questions, such as where Nepal lies in these worlds, if either *Lin'er guo*, *lun min yuan*, or *Kapilavastu* represents the Buddhist worlds manifested in physical geographies that can be explored. Were ancient Chinese monks aware of Nepal's geographic information, and if so, how did they understand it? In the last section, I analysed Zhi Pan's map, which indicates Nepal with famous Buddhist sites. This map positions Nepal in a Buddhist world rather than a secular one. Considering that Zhi Pan's map is a reproduction of knowledge based on the information provided by another well-known Chinese Buddhist monk, Xuan Zang, in the seventh century, it might be constructive to examine how Xuan Zang understood Nepal. Relevant records of Nepal are included in Xuan Zang's renowned *da tang xi yu ji*, or *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*. To the best of my knowledge, it is the first time in history that the transliteration of the name Nepal directly appears in Chinese historical accounts.

> "The kingdom of *Ni-bo-lo* has a circumference of about four thousand leagues. It is situated in the heart of the snowy mountains. The capital has a circuit of about twenty leagues. This country offers the spectacles of a chain of mountains and valley; the soil is productive for the cultivation of grains and abounds in flowers and fruits… the inhabitants are naturally hard and ferocious; they do not consider good faith and justice as worth having and have absolutely no literary attainments; but they are gifted with skill and dexterity in arts. Their bodies are ugly, and their faces beastly…." ((Xuan Zang, 2000); translation above from (Levi, 1989: 64-65); my Chinese transliteration)

> "To the north-east of the arrow well about 80 or 90 *li*, we come to the Lumbini (*la fa ni*) garden. Here is the bathing tank of the Sakyas…

> To the north of these 24 or 25 paces there is … the place where Bodhisattva was born… east from this is a stupa built by Ashoka-raja,…" ((Xuan Zang, 2000); translation above from (Beal ed., 1884))

Even though the location *Ni bo luo* is recorded in Xuan Zang's travelogue, it has been suggested that he did not visit the country himself but acquired relevant information from local guides (Regmi, 1960; Levi, 1989). Nonetheless, according to his description, the kingdom in the

snowy mountains does not represent the entire territory of modern Nepal. It most likely refers only to the Kathmandu Valley area. Xuan Zang's account also indicates that he was clearly aware *Ni bo luo* was not the Buddhist Kingdom depicted in Fa Xian's *fo guo ji*. He did visit the ruins of Kapilavastu personally and recorded his experience under a separate entry titled *jie bi luo fa su du guo*. He also acknowledges that Kapilavastu was mistakenly called *jia wei luo wei* previously, a correction he makes in his book (Xuan Zang, 2000).

So, how does Xuan Zang understand the relationship between *ni bo luo* and Kapilavastu? To a large extent, Xuan Zang's narration mirrors the method employed by Fa Xian in *fo guo ji*, i.e., arranging places of the Buddhist world and secular world in the same consistent temporal-spatial matrix. His geographical imagination diverges from the world he encounters in reality, surpassing the constraints of his physical perception. It journeys through past, present, and future, blending the daily experiential world with marvellous imagination, thereby creating a splendid otherworld that transcends the limited experiential realms.

However, if Fa Xian's "Buddhist Indo-philia" emphasises India as the Central Country, relegating China to the periphery (Mosca, 2013: 42), then Xuan Zang's Buddhist worldview and secular *Tianxia* cosmology mutually mediate and compromise each other (Ji, 2020). For example, he begins his travelogue by positioning China and India in Jambudvipa as the land of the lord of men and the land of the lord of elephants, respectively. In comparing the two lands, Xuan Zang underscores that China excels in law and literature, while India shines in spiritual teachings that can liberate minds and break the cycle of life and death. While recognising the merits of both lands, Xuan Zang also emphasises that all groups in India were eager to accept the imperial instructions and extol his merits and virtues (Beal ed., 1884:15).

The Buddhist worldview was not the only lens through which the ancient Chinese perceived the kingdom of Nepal. Historical records from contemporaries of Xuan Zang suggest an understanding of Nepal derived from a secular perspective. In other records left by monks during Xuan Zang's time, *Ni bo luo* was mentioned separately as an independent country situated between *Tu bo* (Tibet) and *Tian zhu* (India). For instance, Yi Jing's (c.a. 635-713) *Buddhist Pilgrim Monks of Tang Dynasty* (Ch. da tang xi yu qiu fa gao seng zhuan; (Yi Jing, 2000)) records several Chinese monks who visited India via Tibet and Nepal. Xuan Zhao, as recorded by Yi Jing, was a monk who made a unique journey. He met with Chinese Princess Wencheng in Tibet twice during his travels. Unfortunately, Nepal was a dangerous journey for

many Chinese monks, as Yi Jing records. His comment that "Nepal is full of poison, that is why many monks died when they arrived there" (Ch. ni bo luo ji you du yao, suo yi dao bi duo wang) highlights the health hazards and difficulties that these travellers faced.

Furthermore, accounts left by secular agents, such as Wang Xuance, an ancient Chinese diplomat who repeatedly travelled between China, Tibet, Nepal, and India, contained details of ancient Nepal. These accounts suggest routes and communications of a certain frequency between ancient China, Tibet, and Nepal were established in the seventh century, and comprehensive information about Nepal was available (see Levi, 1967; Feng, 1963; Huang, 1980; Huo, 2000).

Both Kapilavastu and Nepal, each with varying transliterations, continued to appear in other Chinese records post the seventh century. Each tends to symbolise a specific worldview. However, as suggested by Zhi Pan's map, the divide between the Buddhist and secular worldviews is blurry, flexible, and mutable. Buddhist geographic knowledge informs many non-Buddhist historical accounts, and accounts composed by secular agents become significant materials to enrich the details of the Buddhist worlds. Therefore, Kapilavastu and Nepal do not exist separately in their respective worlds but simultaneously coexist in different worlds. This situation was further complicated as these worlds extended to various actors' motivations, agendas, activities, and links among them. One result of such complexity is the coexistence of at least dozens of representations of Nepal in Chinese. No one representation is more accurate than others because the authority and accuracy of knowledge are subjective rather than objective, depending on their alignment with specific worldviews, power endorsement, and media.

From Yu Huan, Fa Xian, Xuan Zang, Wang Xuance to Zhi Pan, ancient China's knowledge of Nepal did not evolve as new information was added to the same pool and forming a coherent knowledge bank. Instead, each of them produced their own knowledge of a specific place, and these places in their accounts, counterintuitively, might not even represent the same geographic space. Throughout Chinese history, ontologically, epistemologically, culturally, and politically, the existence of Nepal was never definitively confirmed. It was always veiled, and only parts of it were permitted to be shown to the Chinese audience through specific mediators. It also drifted among various worlds. While it coexisted in different worlds, it never entirely and

securely belonged to a specific one. In other words, it lived in limbos between different worlds, a liminal and uncertain place.

However, it appears that this limbo in which Nepal existed for hundreds, if not thousands of years, no longer exists for us. When we mention either Kapilavastu or Nepal now, they roughly signify the same geography and culture in our knowledge systems. But why is this so? Who eradicated other perceptions of Nepal? And why did this particular understanding of Nepal survive?

The Familiar Strangers-Imagined Solidarity in the Colonising Languages

> "Nepal, isolated on the south of the Himalayan mountains, has been a tributary country to us. (However,) it has kept self-lockism for generations…It is my shame that *I have to cite a certain (foreign) explorer's account to the lef*t so our people can well understand this country's recent development." (Shou Gong, 1913)

> "Nepal, the vassal who had never stopped sending envoys with tributes to us … since the Revolution, had stopped relations with us out of no reason. *The British imperialist*… employed appeasement policies in Nepal and turned out to be very effective… I have conducted some research on the situations of the Nepali kingdom, hoping to contribute to my people." (Li, 1934)

> "Nepal, an independent kingdom …The Nepali people are honest and loyal, working hard without complaint; they also possess strong abilities of adaptability, and are brave and skilled warriors, ... What is more, this country's economic development has a bright future-hoping Nepali people can work hard to achieve it! Currently, Nepal has only established the diplomatic relationship with Britain. … it can make more contacts with *Asian countries* and together plan welfare for the *Asian people*." (Zhang, 1944a)

> "The Nepali people, under such double pressure, have bravely shouted
> out the slogans of '*defeat the imperialism*' and 'defeat the Rana rule'…
> In November 1951, all the progressive parties, echoing the appeal made
> by the Nepali Communist Party, have formed the united front of
> people's democracy and nation's independence." (Tie Shan, 1952)

These excerpts cited above are from essays and articles published in various Chinese journals during the early to middle of the twentieth century. This period witnessed dramatic transformations in both domestic and regional situations in the Himalayan area. In China, two national administrations were established in succession with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeating the Kuomintang and establishing its sovereignty in mainland China in 1949. In Nepal, with the British colonisers withdrawing from India, the Rana autocratic administration was overthrown in a democratic movement in 1951, and the monarchy was restored with the advent of King Tribhuvan. These changes in domestic, regional, and international situations prompted both states to adjust their agendas towards each other.

From the Kuomintang to CCP governments, China's interests in Nepal changed from maintaining the old tributary relationship to borderland security and ideological competition. Meanwhile, the King of Nepal, while remaining cautious of the expansion of Communism from the north, needed China's presence in the Himalayas to leverage India's strong influence. Moreover, the two newly independent states shared common decolonial agendas at the international level as participants of the Third World. The change in agendas required both states to construct solidarity based on notions like anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, independence, cooperation, development, and modernisation, and aimed to contribute not only to Nepal and China but also to Asia, the Third World, and the globe.

Naturally, these new tides altered people's ways of learning and imagining, which in turn changed their ways of writing and other forms of knowledge production. The excerpts cited above demonstrate the exact new trend of learning, imagination, and writing about Nepal among some Chinese intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century. They suggest that, for the first time, Nepal, historically seen as a semi-agnostic country in the Himalayas, became an explicit mirror for many Chinese, especially intellectuals from so-called 'modern' socio-cultural backgrounds, to reflect on many complicated and interlinked issues. These issues included China's decline in the new and West-dominated world order, Europe's colonial and

imperialist expansion, and cooperation and solidarity among Asian countries. The exploration of these questions, which centred on Nepal, necessitated new knowledge about this neighbour.

The fundamental problem was not that Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century were unaware of Chinese historical contact with Nepal. Instead, they encountered the same problem that had haunted their ancestors for hundreds of years: through which language should Nepal be known? This time, they were forced to depend on a new language, the language of European colonial adventurers, historians, archaeologists, and philologists, to learn, imagine, and write about Nepal. Also unprecedentedly, as I will analyse soon, the 'exotic' language stemming from Europe successfully dragged Nepal out of its historical position in limbo between worlds by dominantly silencing other local languages or absorbing them.

By the end of the late 19th century, Nepal was, to a large extent, a familiar stranger to most of the Chinese population. As the terminology in social science and humanity denotes (e.g. Clarke, 2005; Ramahi and Suleiman, 2017; Scott, 2016; Su et al., 2018), Nepal represented a nexus of imaginal familiarity and otherness for most Chinese people at that time. Although miscellaneous records of the neighbouring country were scattered around bookshelves, they remained largely unknown to the Chinese public. History seemed to repeat itself, as in the late 18th century, when the Qianlong emperor and his ministers were interested in Nepal due to the military conflict it brought rather than because of a genuine interest in the country itself. Similarly, Chinese intellectuals' focus on the Himalayan country in the early 20th century was not driven by a concern for the country itself, but rather by larger issues that required knowledge of Nepal.

This phenomenon led to an interesting observation: Chinese knowledge production about Nepal in the early 20th century, compared to works after the mid-20th century, rarely focused solely on the countries' bilateral relations and history. According to the works in my archive, there is always the presence of a third party in the Chinese literature on Nepal during this period. In many cases, this third party is explicit and takes specific forms, such as Britain, the English language, foreign explorers, Europe, and imperialists. At times, this third party is implicit, manifesting as a sense of disappointment, confusion, and aspiration for modernity and development interwoven throughout the text. Whether explicit or implicit, this third party, rather than Nepal itself, becomes the genuine subject of these documents. Furthermore, this third party represents the trinity of power, language, and speech. As the following analysis of

these documents reveals, by providing themes and utilising language legitimising the discussion of these themes, this third party successfully controlled various stages of Chinese knowledge production about Nepal in the early 20th century.

The earliest modern Chinese records about Nepal in the 1910s, from my archive, fully demonstrate the communicative situations in which knowledge of Nepal was embedded. These records were either written by Chinese residing in the UK or translated from foreign sources. On 11th and 13th August 1911, The Discussion of Nepal (Ch. *lun ni bo er* ; Qiu Tong, 1911a, 1911b), a long article divided into two parts, was published in Shen Bao (1872-1949), one of the earliest and most influential Chinese newspapers in the late Qing and Republic period. The major theme of this article revolves around Nepal and China's vassal-tributary relations, aiming to expose the incompatibility of the 'backward' traditional Chinese arrangement of the international society and the modern West-dominated world order.

The article begins by distinguishing two knowledge systems through which Nepal could be known by analysing the various translations of the country's name in Chinese. For the writer, these two knowledge systems are not equally parallel but hierarchical. The traditional Chinese knowledge of Nepal, represented by the name "Gorkha", is considered inaccurate and hastily generalised, while the Western knowledge of the country, represented by the name "Nepal", is believed to enable deep and comprehensive explorations. After inviting Western geographic knowledge to the conversation as a superior epistemology, the writer turns to explain why Nepal attracts the focus of this article.

Sometime before the article was written, the government of the Republic of China (R.C.) attempted to claim China's suzerainty over Nepal and Bhutan from Britain, which was refuted by the British side. Britain further defined both Nepal and Bhutan as independent states. The writer felt humiliated not by Britain but rather by the R.C. and criticised the latter's reckless action of claiming suzerainty over Nepal and Bhutan as "noises from little pawns" (Ch. *lou luo na han*). It should be noted that the writer does not deny China's suzerainty over these Himalayan countries but rather criticises the R.C. government's reckless action of seeking rights from the British government without comprehensive preparations, especially at a time when its own sovereignty was partially rendered to Britain.

To support the argument, the writer first examines the alleged foundation of China's suzerainty over Nepal, which is merely based on the fact that "Nepal has to send tributes to Beijing every several years," following "China's traditional method to control and ease barbarians (Ch. *rong*)." Therefore, the writer concludes that "there has never been a concrete relationship between us and Nepal." The writer then provides an example of what a stable and concrete relationship between states should resemble, using the relationship between Nepal and Britain. It is noted that "it is only England that has the most intimate relations with it." The writer dedicates several paragraphs to introduce the development of Britain's presence in Nepal since the late 18th century. From the writer's perspective, the concrete modern states' relationship, as exemplified by the one between Nepal and Britain, is bound by written treaties and supported by military force. Although unequal and to some extent humiliated, these treaties offered Nepal opportunities to join the global society of civilised countries, particularly maintaining a close special relationship with Britain. The writer also expresses admiration toward Nepal's Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana, who is attributed to solely maintaining positive relations with Britain and saving his nation from being colonised.

In the second half of the article, Qiu Tong proposes eight questions to challenge China's claim of suzerainty over Nepal, ultimately shifting the focus to questions of how China could be strong and 'civilised' in the colonial international order.

> "First) Over the one hundred and twenty years since 1791, England and Nepal have signed many treaties. Have we ever complained to England?
>
> Second) What was our country's position when England and Nepal were fighting each other from 1814 to 1816?
>
> Third) England has taken all of Nepal's territories west of the Kali River after the war in 1816. Does that mean our country also has lost territories?
>
> Fourth) Since 1816, British officers have resided in Nepal, and the Nepali prime minister has been granted the English lordship and was a military officer in the British army. In addition to receiving tributes from it, do we have other types of relations?

Fifth) The Nepali people crave British politics and have been reformed for sixty years. However, our country's civilisation is increasingly deteriorating. Do we still have the qualification to be its suzerain?

Sixth) In 1857, the Nepali army assisted the British army to pacify the Indian mutiny. What does this mean in terms of international laws? Was the Nepali army dispatched by us?

Seventh) In 1904, the British army invaded Lhasa. If Nepal is our vassal, why would our country remain silent over its assistance to Britain?

Eighth) How can the meaning of the Gorkha regiment be explained?
(Qiu Tong, 1911b; my translation)

Qiu Tong also asserts that as long as one of these eight questions is answered, China's claim over Nepal's suzerainty will become baseless immediately. The writer argues that in international laws, there are no concepts of power in abstract forms. Despite China's claim of absolute suzerainty over Nepal, this power may have been nullified for over one hundred and twenty years. The writer anticipates that the first question from the British will be related to this matter (Ibid).

Based on these concerns, the writer concludes that the solution on China's side should prioritise reforming the government and aiming to amend its political and jurisdictional systems in the shortest period, with the goal of making it enter the group of civilised countries. Only through this way can China be qualified to encounter those strong powers, and then taking Nepal back would become possible. (Ibid)

It is evident from the above summary that although Nepal and Nepal-China's traditional relationship appears to be the subject of Qiu Tong's articles, they merely serve as a superficial clue, leading to the writer's examination of Britain's superior colonial power and China's passive relations with that power. In this sense, the knowledge of Nepal and access to that knowledge are strictly embedded and embodied in a new context that comprises various norms

of international law, British politics, diplomatic activities, and military cooperation stemming from European contexts. These aspects contribute to othering and de-legitimising local norms of knowledge and state relations.

Confronted with the power that simultaneously supports the communicative contexts of new knowledge of Nepal and degrades local knowledge, the writer appears contradictory. On the one hand, s/he realises the aggression and destruction caused by British colonial powers; thus, s/he repeatedly asks the government to conduct careful preparation before directly confronting Britain. On the other hand, the so-called preparation in the writer's mind largely represents re-coding local histories and cultural norms into the programmes offered by the British side. This way, the Chinese might have the capacity to debate with the British, and the capacity of debate is supported by 'civilised' powers.

In general, Qiu Tong's articles comprehensively demonstrate the coloniality of power, as the Eurocentric mirror always distorts other people's images (Quijano, 2000: 574). Feeling dissatisfied with the distorted images, people like Qiu Tong were confined to choosing to grasp the power that makes the mirror, making the distorted reflection corrected, rather than breaking the mirror itself. Such self-contradictory thinking was largely shared by many contemporary intellectuals with Qiu Tong and influenced their ways of imagining and writing about Nepal (e.g. Gesangzeren, 1931; Lei, 1930; Li, 1934, 1930; N/A, 1930, 1929; Song Hua, 1930)

One characteristic that defined many people's ways of imagining and writing about Nepal during that time is a general presuppose, as the excerpt from Shou Gong' s translation shows at the beginning of this section, that China did not possess its own knowledge about Nepal. Consequently, it needed to rely on Western knowledge to understand Nepal. Rather than implying a complete absence of knowledge about Nepal in any form, this assumption suggests the absence of relevant knowledge in Western forms and standards. Confronting this absence of knowledge, two primary methods were employed. The first method involved the direct translation of existing works in European languages, mainly English. Kirkpatrick's *Account of the Kingdom of Nepaul* (1811), Hamilton's *An Account of the Kingdom of Nepal* (1819), Wright's *History of Nepaul* (1877), and Perceval Landon's *Nepal* (1928) were among the primary resources on the list.

The second method, although not directly addressing Nepal, involved re-evaluating traditional Chinese materials using 'modern' and 'advanced' Western academic methodologies. For example, Zhang Xianlang (1888-1951), a renowned Chinese historical geographer who significantly contributed to funding the discipline of China's relations with foreign countries (Zhang, 2018), composed the five-volume *The Materials for a History of Sino-Foreign Relations* (Ch. *Zhong xi jiao tong shi liao hui bian*). Furthermore, Feng Chengjun (1887-1946), another Chinese historian and student of Paul Eugène Pelliot, the famous Sinologist, collected and published historical materials of Wang Xuance, based on the extant works of his teacher and Sylvain Lévi (Feng, 1963). Tang Yongtong (1893-1964), employing similar methods, systematically compiled the history of Buddhism in China for around three hundred years from the third century. When discussing ancient Chinese monks' records of westward travel, Tang (2008) highlights that these rare ancient Chinese records were valued by Westerners as treasures. In these works, Nepal-related historical materials from diverse contexts and backgrounds were compiled into clusters of specific themes and chronicles, and arranged into the same linear timeline of history. The boundary between the Buddhist and secular worlds was blurred with the introduction of Western languages of positivist science. The methodological update in these works is legitimised by two new intellectual agendas.

The first is to remap China's history, present, and future into a new knowledge system concerning its relations with other countries, as the traditional system was de-legitimised. This contributes to the other larger question of preserving the Chinese nation. For instance, in the preface to his extensive archive, Zhang Xinglang (2018) connects China's decline in the modern periods with its historical Sinocentrism, which caused ignorance of other parts of the world. This ignorance was further exacerbated by the traditional Chinese literati's monopoly in the production of geographical knowledge and their desk-based textual criticism working style. Consequently, Zhang praises positivism in Western historiography and geography research, asserting that it has resolved numerous issues that traditional Chinese literati could not address. Zhang implies that adopting Western methodologies was not about blindly replicating Western academic paradigms but rather a struggle to preserve China's academic sovereignty. He declares, "Should Chinese history and geography be clarified by Westerners, how can we not learn from others while eagerly awaiting the results of their research on us?" (ibid: 5; my translation)

Both Qiu Tong's reflections on the China-Nepal tributary relationship and the academic reform advocated by Chinese intellectuals primarily focused on China's endangered trajectory in the modern European-dominated world order. With China's traditional worldview shattered and the world order characterised by divisions of civilisation and tributary relationships replaced by the one maintained by Western international law and global capitalism, traditional Chinese historical and geographical knowledge could no longer sustain China's power in the international community. Consequently, China and Chinese intellectuals needed to reassess their understanding of their relations with the rest of the world. Contemplations on these issues largely guided early 20th-century Chinese intellectuals like Qiu Tong and Zhang Xinglang in their interests in Nepal and the history of China's foreign relations. Their efforts of rediscovering China's historical relations with other countries represented parts of systematic projects of reprogramming China's coordinates on a new world map. This new map is thick rather than flattened. The map is also constructed to selectively represent knowledge that did not exist before the knowledge (MacEachren, 1995), thus configuring knowledge rather than truthfully reflecting information itself. The construction of the new world map, namely, the process of configuring new historic-geographic knowledge, centres on the spatial-temporal nexuses of knowledge that are constituted by the vectors of geography and history. If the dimension composed of geographic information illustrates the contemporary form of the world and various areas' locations and shapes in this version of the world, then the historical vectors embed the geographic coordinates and shapes in history, as well as reshaping history with modern geographic outlines.

Throughout the remapping processes, Western hegemonic power was evident at almost every stage, as they offer a "standardised form of knowledge which establishes a prescribed set of possibilities for knowing, seeing and acting. They create a knowledge space within which certain kinds of understandings and of knowing subjects, material objects and their relations in space and time are authorised and legitimated." (Turnbull, 1996: 7). Moreover,

> "The establishment of this new international space set in motion the
> process whereby the whole of the earth's territory could be mapped as
> one. All sites would be rendered equivalent, all localness would vanish
> in the homogenization and geometrization of space…" (Ibid: 19).

The analysis of the works from my archive suggests that many early 20th-century Chinese intellectuals who paid attention to Nepal or China's relations with other countries did not appear averse to Western hegemonic power remaking the new world map. On the contrary, they aspired to participate in it, hoping that China could become a so-called civilised nation like the Nepal they envisioned, which had a clearly marked position in the new world. Although not necessarily applicable to all intellectuals, the works in my archive directly or indirectly indicate that most Chinese scholars involved in the construction of Nepal knowledge during this period enjoyed certain privileges as local elites who were influential in producing dominant historical narratives (Duara, 1995). Many had access to foreign literature; several had long-term educational experiences in the West, receiving higher education at Western universities, and some even settled in Europe. One result of their experience and status was the colonisation of their minds, which "created [in them] epistemological mimicry and intellectual dependency" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Chambati, 2013: 38) through carefully disguised discourses of civilisation, modernity, strength, and newness. For some, the coloniality of their minds was so strong that they were fully conquered by Western colonial particularism. For example, a scholar published an article titled Biographies of Great Chinese Overseas Colonisers (Ya Xia, 1913; Ch. *zhon guo hai wai zhi min wei ren zhuan*;) in the *Journal of Geography* (Ch. *di xue za zhi*; 1910-1937), the most influential geographical journal during the Republican period (Xu and Yao, 2006), documenting ancient Chinese overseas migration cases to inspire Chinese nationals to strive for strength, hoping that China could become an imperialist nation like Europe and America. From this, it can be seen that although these Chinese local (transnational) elites indeed joined China in Western-controlled knowledge production through learning, translation, and writing, they also consciously or unconsciously aided colonial domination as described by (Fanon, 1963: 18, 67). They spectacularly disrupted the cultural life of the conquered people, grafting the hierarchy of colonial power into the Chinese context, and dramatically constructing the hegemony of Western knowledge production in the local context. With the colonial languages and methods of 'science' and backed up by colonial powers, they participated in the process of emptying "the native's brain of all form and content" and "By a kind of perverse logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts it, disfigures, and destroys it." While scholars like Zhang Xinglang, Feng Chengjun, and Tang Yongtong 'rescued' rare Chinese materials, they also sacrificed the various histories' localness to a limited prescribed way of thinking.

So far, I have mainly discussed the coloniality of Chinese knowledge production in Nepal by focusing on the works of some local elites. While these local elites were preoccupied with looking at Nepal and other parts of the world as references to China's position in the new world, the state government was also engaged in similar tasks, and their logic and reactions to these tasks were also dominated by coloniality. In 1931, the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission, a ministry-level commission of the government of the Republic of China, posted notices in *Shen bao* for several days, announcing that they had tasked specific personnel to translate Perceval Landon's *Nepal* into Chinese (N/A, 1931). The tendency of learning about Nepal from European resources did not stop even after the establishment of the PRC government. In 1955, several months before Nepal and China established diplomatic relations, China Youth Publishing House published an article in Guangming Daily (Ch. *guang ming ri bao*), publicly condemning a broker exploiting translators and cheating the publishing house. Among the exploits this broker had conducted was a book about Nepal translated from Russian resources (Gao, 1955). These state-tasked translation and learning missions did not stand separately; to a large extent, they were conditioned by and conditioning other various types of events regarding state-building, nation relations, and security.

Although direct evidence is lacking, it is highly likely that the abovementioned translation mission of Landon's book by the Chinese government resulted from a potential conflict between Nepal and China in the early 1930s. In 1929, Sherpa Gyalpo, a Lhasa-based Nepali, was arrested by the Tibetan authorities on charges of trading cigarettes and tobacco illicitly. Conflicts regarding whether the Tibetan administration had jurisdiction over Sherpa Gyalpo erupted between Nepal and Tibet. The situation quickly soured when the Tibetan authorities forcibly took Gyalpo away from the Nepali Legation where he was seeking asylum and put him in jail again. In response, Nepal quickly mobilised its army for war. Fearing the threat from the south, the Tibetan authorities turned to Nanjing for help[6]. Although the war was eventually prevented from happening through diplomatic channels, the news of Nepal invading Tibet stormed Chinese media. For a long time, details of the conflicts that triggered Nepal's aggressive stance toward Tibet remained a myth in Chinese media. For instance, in a journal article published by Current Affairs Monthly (Ch. *shi shi yue bao*) (Lei, 1930), it is exposed

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[6] For a more comprehensive discussion of the conflicts given the episode of war, please refer to (Mishra, 1991; Uprety, 1980; Zhu, 2016).

that what raised the conflicts was a Nepali citizen in Tibet being executed because of his refusal to pay extra tax to the Tibetan administration.

One significant consequence of the potential conflict between China and Nepal was the substantial increase in Nepal's exposure in Chinese media. According to the incomplete data in my archive, the number of documents related to Nepal in Chinese newspapers during the 1930s exceeded the sum of those from the previous twenty years. Most of these documents were related to the border dispute and its subsequent developments. The majority of articles focused on the underlying causes and triggers of the dispute, emphasising the intricate relationship between Nepal and China, Tibet, and Britain (Lei, 1930; Li, 1934; N/A, 1930b, 1930c, 1930d; Qu, 1935; Song Hua, 1930). Only a few articles continued the previous trend of translating foreign materials unrelated to the border disputes to introduce Nepal (N/A, 1930e; Tian Hong, 1935).

In general, people's partial comprehension of the border disputes did not prevent it from becoming the site where sentiments and ideas of anti-imperialism, patriotism, national pride, and nationalism, as well as shock, insecurity, and humiliation, were articulated.

> "Our people only started to notice this small country in eastern Asia last year when the news of Nepal invading Tibet was widely spread. (Now) We know that although it is a small country, it can still be a totally independent state in Eastern Asia. Our people used to be surprised that Siam (Thailand) could achieve what we could not, cancel unequal treaties with foreign countries, and take back consular jurisdiction. It never occurred to us that Nepal, …can remain unyielding and sign equal treaties with it, making Britain dare not covet it… However, our so-called celestial and gorgeous kingdom has been so weak. How can we not feel ashamed and guilty?" (Tian Hen, 1931; my translation)

The excerpt above is from a commentary published by Shen bao in 1931 after the potential war between the two states had already been averted through diplomatic channels. As it suggests, during this period, most Chinese documents concerning Nepal focused on the topic of national humiliation. They closely linked the issues of border security and national sovereignty with

national humiliation and connected this conflict to broader themes, such as the revival of the Chinese nation, the implementation of the Three Principles of the People, and the fight against imperialism.

Many scholars studying modern Chinese history agree that the discourse of national humiliation has become an integral part of the construction of Chinese nationalism (Callahan, 2006, 2004; Huang, 2017; Wang, 2008). However, the exact incorporation of humiliation into Chinese national identity is multifaceted and dynamic. Callahan (2004: 207) insightfully points out that the discourse of national humiliation "joins all Chinese in a performance that is both critical and self-critical." Nonetheless, the nature of this critical and self-critical stance is conditioned, shifting, and flexible. This flexibility was particularly evident in early 20th-century China, where warlords fought among themselves, Chinese and Western ideologies competed for intellectual and public opinion ground, and no single powerful force could definitively define the enemy, the defence strategy, or the embodiment of the nation. The works on Nepal during this period clearly reflect such chaos and complexity.

First, in relation to the issue of identifying the enemy or the cause of China's humiliation, there was no consensus across the articles of that time. While all documents described the conflict as "Nepal invading Tibet," almost all commentaries agreed that Nepal was instigated by Britain to invade Tibet. In other words, many people believed that Britain was the mastermind behind the conflict. The conflict between Nepal and Tibet was depicted as British ambition towards Tibet, constituting the "first brutal step in *implementing* armed oppression of Tibetans" (Zhong yang zhou kan, 1930a). Consequently, Nepal was not seen as genuinely wanting to invade Tibet but rather as a small nation with limited capabilities, compelled to submit to Britain's control (Song hua, 1930). To a large extent, transforming the Nepal-Tibet dispute into an international conflict involving Britain may have been a propaganda strategy of the Republican government. However, this is not to entirely dismiss the possibility of British involvement in the dispute. In fact, the initial intelligence received by the Republican government also indicated British interference. The point here is to highlight that the Republican government utilised the Nepal-Tibet dispute to advance the agenda of completing the modern Chinese nation-state.

In an article titled The Inside Story of Nepal's Military Invasion of Tibet (1930) published in *Zhong yang zhou kan*, a journal compiled by the Propaganda Department of the Central Executive Committee of the Kuomintang, a specific strategy is manifested. Firstly, similar to

Qiu Tong's previous proposal of introducing the transliteration "Nepal" to signify the new West-centric international order, the commentary begins by reiterating Nepal's old transliteration in Chinese, emphasising that Nepal was originally Chinese territory later forcibly incorporated as a protectorate by Britain. The article then elaborates on Nepal's active and friendly relationship with China as a tributary, as well as the process by which it became a protectorate under British control. The conclusion states that the central government had already initiated efforts to help Tibet "jointly resist foreign enemies and strengthen border defence." By portraying British imperialists as a common enemy, such articles not only transformed Nepal into China's vassal or inherent territory but also brought Tibet back within China's defensive borders. Moreover, some literature engaged in self-criticism, analysing the internal factors that led to the dispute, although they still frame British imperialism as an external enemy. These factors included the incompetence of the previous Qing government, which resulted in the disruption of Nepal's traditional friendship with China (Gesangzeren, 1931), and the reactionary forces represented by warlords within the country that weakened the central government's authority (Ren Min, 1930). Consequently, the proposed solution to the crisis involved fostering friendly relations with Nepal, opposing British imperialism, and strengthening China's power. In response to these approaches, various intellectuals presented their specific strategies to different extents. Although differing in detail, these strategies all pointed in the same 'progressive' direction: strengthening a unified China as a powerful nation-state to resist foreign humiliation.

However, differing opinions arose regarding the question of "whose nation-state" was referred to in these documents. The official stance of the Republican government still aimed to restore the traditional 'friendship' with Nepal. When Ba Wenjun, the Republic of China's envoy to Nepal in 1930 to negotiate settlement plans for the dispute, visited Nepal, he was instructed with four conditions issued by the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission. The first of these conditions was "to recover China and Nepal's intimate relations of old days" (MTAC, 1930 cited in Liu, 2010). When Ba returned to Nanjing by the end of 1930, he brought gifts and messages from the Nepali administration, who wanted China to grant the Nepali Prime Minister a high-level military rank. The Chinese side misunderstood Nepal's message as a gesture to cherish the previous vassal-suzerain relationship with China. Eventually, the Chinese government agreed to grant the Nepali Prime Minister the rank of Admiral and sent him a medal in 1932 (see Guo, 1932; N/A, 1932; Zhu, 2016).

During that time, the official stance regarding Nepal, however, did not gain widespread public support. While most Chinese-language materials emphasised the former vassal-suzerain relationship between Nepal and China, they also adopted a 'progressive' attitude in re-evaluating their relationship. These materials acknowledged Nepal as an independent nation in Asia. The most 'progressive' voices even critically argued that China should not only construct solidarity with an independent Nepal but also support Tibet's independence, uniting oppressed Eastern nations to resist British imperialism (N/A, 1930e).

Contrary to contemporary Chinese discourses, which were influenced by European Orientalism and linear developmental concepts, portraying Nepal as mysterious, chaotic, and underdeveloped, it is crucial to emphasise that during that period, Nepal was regarded by some Chinese as one of the representative nations in Asia with political, economic, and military independence. It was admired as "Japan in the mountains" by some Chinese intellectuals (Gesangzeren, 1931) and seen as a symbol of progress and modernity.

In 1932, Zhang Ming visited Nepal on behalf of the Chinese side to confer military rank and send gifts to Nepal's Prime Minister. As one of the few Chinese people who had visited Nepal in person at that time, Zhang expressed his admiration for Nepal's modernisation, independence, industrial development, and national unity in interviews with journalists after his return to China. Zhang also praised the Nepali people for their adherence to traditional Eastern morals, courteous and kind demeanour, and simple customs. He noted their resilience and martial prowess, with a standing army of 100,000 and a reserve force of 200,000. He also mentioned their ample supply of arms and ammunition for self-defence purposes. In times of foreign aggression, the people would collectively rise to defend their nation without needing the government's call to action. The government, in turn, prioritised public opinion, resulting in a united and strong nation that deterred powerful neighbours. Zhang further admired the Nepali people's reluctance to use foreign goods, as they relied on domestically produced items for everyday use. Despite Nepal's small size and population, it was not bound by customs duties or restricted by consular jurisdiction, making it a truly independent country. Zhang expressed his deep feelings of admiration for Nepal's strength, comparing it to China's vast territory and large population (N/A, 1932b).

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, a substantial corpus of Chinese literature on Nepal (N/A, 1947a, 1947b; Qiu Ye, 1944; Yi Ou, 1947) shared convergent perspectives, regarding Nepal as

a symbol of independent, progressive, and evolving Asia. These works extolled Nepal's accomplishments while drawing comparisons with China, lamenting China's lagging progress in modern civilisation development and its historical subordination. As a result, the concept of humiliation encompasses not only the tangible border crisis or a reversal of national power, but also the unease, introspection, and exploration of Chinese intellectuals' ambiguous and regressive positioning within West-centric development paradigms. Hence, the influence of the European third party re-emerges overtly or covertly in the knowledge production process of China's discourse on Nepal, governing the logic and rhetoric of discussions, even those opposing British imperialism, as all distinctions are circumscribed within the Eurocentric ideological framework.

Callahan (2006:215) astutely observes that humiliation represents "a transnational model that...is intertwined not just with modern China but with modernity." Within this modernity narrative, binary oppositions such as East and West, barbarism and civilisation, and backwardness and advancement form the foundational grammar for constructing narratives of modernity. The advocated solidarity between China and Nepal aims to resist British imperialism but fundamentally seeks to emancipate China from British constraints, enabling China to develop and align with the advanced and modern camp. Consequently, modern development entails elements such as a robust democratic government, a unified nation, a potent military, a mature industrial system, a stable consumer market, an independent judiciary, and tariffs, among others. However, it remains challenging to determine whether China's observations and descriptions of Nepal's modernity were objective assessments or imaginative portrayals based on one-sided observations. For instance, Bao Wenjun, who visited Nepal and reported his observations upon returning to China, focused on indicators of modernisation and development, such as Western-style transportation and architecture (N/A, 1930d), to showcase Nepal's material progress.

The relationship between the dominant European-centric worldview and local history and culture is complex and multifaceted. Zhang Ming's reference to "Eastern old morality" and the Nationalist government's desire to restore traditional friendly relations highlight that European influence did not completely erase localness but rather engaged with it in intricate ways. In the post-1940s period, the depiction of the Western third party became less prominent in China's knowledge production on Nepal. Instead, Chinese scholars embarked on an "Asia-turn" to study Nepal and other Asian countries. This Asia-turn involves employing "Asia as method"

to reconfigure existing knowledge structures while simultaneously transforming different Asian societies. By conceptualising Asia as an imaginary anchor, Asian societies can serve as mutual points of reference, leading to a re-evaluation of self-understanding and the reconstruction of subjectivity. The Asia-turn is inspiring as it allows Asian societies to draw inspiration from how other Asian societies tackle similar challenges, thereby transcending unproductive anxieties and charting new paths of engagement (Chen, 2010: 212-214). However, the extent to which the Asia-turn has successfully decolonised Chinese knowledge production in relation to Nepal remains a subject of ongoing inquiry.

Zhang Xilin, a scholar from the Republic of China, made significant contributions in the 1940s to re-construct China's knowledge about Nepal by drawing on both countries' local experiences and knowledge. Unlike his contemporaries, Zhang's academic background was heavily influenced by Western scientific disciplines, particularly geology. His interest in the geology of South Asia and the Himalayan region, including Nepal, led him to publish several articles in Chinese from 1943 to 1947, introducing the general situation of Himalayan and other Asian countries, Nepal's geographic conditions, resources, and religions to the Chinese readership (Zhang, 1943, 1944a, 1944b, 1944c, 1946, 1947a).

What sets Zhang apart from his peers is his emphasis on appreciating Nepal on its own terms. Prior to Zhang, much of the Chinese work introducing Nepal tended to either over-emphasise Nepal's previous tributary relationship with China or simply transplant European knowledge of Nepal into the Chinese context. As the aforementioned analysis suggests, in many instances, these two approaches are amalgamated hierarchically, wherein the European information pertaining to Nepal is endowed with the perception of reliability and scientific rigour, while the knowledge of its history and culture, shaped through a European lens, is largely bestowed with the status of universality and canonicity. Zhang's work on Nepal's subjectivity stands out in two domains. Firstly, he persistently sought to restore Nepal's agency and independence in the knowledge-making process. In one of his articles introducing Nepal, Zhang (1943) refutes the prevalent misperceptions and stereotypes about Nepal, emphasising its complete independence and the need to avoid imposing strange and exotic names upon it. He argues that the Nepali people are not fundamentally different from the Chinese and should be treated with respect and equality.

Secondly, Zhang's research on Nepal aligns with the broader passion of many Chinese scholars to re-examine China's borders and its relations with other Asian countries during the Second World War, particularly the eight-year Anti-Japan War. Zhang was a member of the New Asia Academy, founded in 1931 with the objective of reviving Asian nations. The Academy advocated New Asialism, which sought to unite Asian nations based on traditional moral virtues and restore their rightful places in the world, while standing up for the rights of oppressed nations (Ma, 1930).

Zhang Xilin's significant contributions extend to the domain of historical writing. In 1947, he published *A New Account of Nepal* (Ch. *ni bo er xin zhi*) as part of the Academy's publishing project, which stands as modern China's first monograph solely dedicated to a systematic introduction of Nepal. The book, comprising 91 pages divided into ten chapters, commences with two chapters delving into Nepal's ancient and modern histories. Subsequent chapters intricately present Nepal's nature, society, and culture. The final chapter, The Prospect of China-Nepal Relations, not only offers a comprehensive review of Nepal-China historical relations, drawing from a plethora of Chinese and Tibetan primary materials, but it also demonstrates a profound attempt to embed the past, present, and future of Nepal-China relations within concurrent trans-local temporal-spatial contexts.

In retracing the past of Nepal-China relations (Zhang, 1947b), Zhang starts by discussing the accounts of Fa Xian, the first recorded foreign visitor to modern-day Nepal, and Xuan Zang's visit in the 7th century. He then highlights the records of two Chinese envoys' missions to India through Nepal, alongside Nepali envoys' missions to China, bearing unique products. Zhang further engages with the historical myth of Nepali Princess Bhrikuti's marriage to the Tibetan king and her pivotal role as a cultural envoy, disseminating Buddhism and Nepali architectural style to Tibet. The renowned Nepali artist, Arniko, who allegedly worked in thirteenth-century China, also holds a prominent place in Zhang's account. Moreover, Zhang dedicates an entire page to list Nepal-China diplomatic missions exchanged between the 7th and 15th centuries, thus repeatedly tracing the pattern of Nepal-China friendship throughout history. While Zhang's efforts to unearth historical materials are commendable, his most significant contribution to the Nepal-China contact zone lies in his persistent efforts to re-establish contacts with Nepal through an alternative approach to the prevalent imperial routes.

In Zhang's time, much of the knowledge about Nepal could be categorised as imperial knowledge, shaped within fields influenced by trajectories of imperial expansions. This imperial knowledge encompasses European modern information about Nepal, produced through colonial expansion, including expenditures, trade, war, and scientific investigation, as well as imperial China's "outdated" records of Nepal. Beyond these fields, Nepal and China remained strangers to each other, lacking a framework to comprehend one another beyond the imperial lens. Confronting this dilemma, Zhang, in the final section of his book, proposes an alternative method to dismantle the existing knowledge structure.

Following his introduction of the intertwined historical trajectories of Nepal and China, Zhang (1947) posits several pragmatic recommendations to expedite the establishment of normalised diplomatic relations between Nepal and China, predicated on the principles of independence and equality. Zhang's proposals coalesce around the central tenet of anti-imperialism in all its manifestations, placing Nepal and China, particularly Nepal, at the epicentre of regional cooperation discourses. Zhang articulates, "Henceforth, we should eschew the paradigm of vassal-suzerain and relinquish expectations of tribute when we engage with Asian neighbouring nations." He further distils this overarching principle into three more specific ones: "assistance to fragile and endangered nations; egalitarianism among nations; economic reciprocity (Ch. *ji ruo fu qing; min zu ping deng; jing ji hu li*)" (Zhang, 1947: 89-90). Based on these tenets, Zhang underscores the importance of cultivating direct diplomatic connections with Nepal and fostering researchers adept in generating knowledge from empirical fieldwork in Nepal.

The above analysis elucidates that, juxtaposed with his contemporaries, Zhang Xilin was pioneering in reconceptualising Chinese perceptions of Nepal, by foregrounding Nepal's subjectivity and integrating a greater number of local historical narratives into the dialogue. Both of these innovative undertakings serve the broader agenda of decolonisation and anti-imperialism. This political movement endeavoured to harness resources from cultural and historical domains by attempting to forge direct, unmediated cultural and political ties between Nepal and China, a more unadulterated form of imagined solidarity antecedent to colonial involvement. To a certain extent, Zhang's efforts to carve an alternative pathway were efficacious, as the spectres of the colonial 'third party' that had haunted modern Chinese knowledge production since its inception were seemingly occluded in his works, with increased

national and regional confidence evidenced by a more nuanced focus on Nepal, Nepal-China relations, and Asia.

However, occlusion does not necessarily denote the eradication of colonial shadows. Conversely, the obscurity might signify their more extensive and profound penetration, and their more complex entanglement with localness. In essence, confidence was engendered out of a gradual adaptation to and compromise with the new international order, accompanied by an increased understanding of its discursive practices and power mechanisms, leading to possible reactive strategies, as opposed to an absolute renouncement. At this juncture, Zhang was ensnared in a similar quandary as his global contemporaries. While he championed the recognition of Nepal's subjectivity, he fell short of offering a clear articulation of what this subjectivity entailed. Despite his prescience in exposing the constructed exoticism of Nepal by negating numerous idiosyncratic monikers, he eventually gravitated towards the 'neutral' and 'scientific' discourse on Nepal that was engendered and perpetuated by the same hegemonic power that manufactured those peculiar labels, treating them as trustworthy constituents of Nepal's subjectivity.

Furthermore, Zhang's efforts to incorporate a more diverse array of local materials into the conversation, despite his benevolent intentions, inadvertently reinforced Western historiography in the regional context by selectively amalgamating fundamentally incongruous local historical materials, historiographies, and worldviews into the dominant discourse without critical discrimination. For instance, he assimilated the legendary narrative of Nepali Princess Bhrikuti's marriage from a Buddhist worldview into modern Western historiography (please refer Regmi, 1960; Richardson, 1997; Slobodnik, 2004; Tucci, 1962 for the discussion of the identities of Princess Bhrikuti). In this manner, although Zhang endeavoured to enhance the localness of the discourse surrounding Nepal-China relations, he inadvertently forfeited this localness to a singular, universalising perspective of historical interpretation. Moreover, Zhang, in alignment with numerous other Asian scholars, advocated for a united new Asia, positing Nepal and China as anchor points. However, the concept of Asia he pursued, the stark distinctions that fundamentally undermine so-called regional coherence, and how to negotiate the geographic, cultural, political, and historical complexities of this region remain unaddressed. The multiplicity of Nepal's relationships with various regional and extra-regional actors and how this challenges its coherent position in Asia also went undiscussed. Zhang's omission of these pertinent inquiries, to a certain extent, resulted in his works continuing to

bear the imprint of a Eurocentric geographical tradition (Lewis and Wigen, 1997: 186), causing his theoretical constructs to represent an exogenous outsider's static perspective rather than an endogenous insider's emic viewpoint.

Although it may appear rhetorical, it is largely justified to posit that the 1950s marked the ushering in of a new era in Nepal-China relations, given the comprehensive transformation of nearly every factor contextualising the contact zone. Generally, as Western colonisers withdrew from Asia and former colonies transitioned into independent nation-states, there was a complete overhaul of the political, cultural, economic, and social landscapes within Asian contexts. Furthermore, the Nepal-China contact zone was deeply embedded within, and affected by, the complexities of the Cold War. This contact zone was also intricately involved in global initiatives aimed at re-evaluating and reconstructing Afro-Asian camaraderie, transcending merely regional conflicts and cooperation. A wealth of literature has explored Nepal-China relations both on a regional scale and within a global framework (Adhikārī, 2010; Bhatt, 1996; Ghoble, 1986; Mulmi, 2021; Nayak, 2014; Raj, 1978; Ramakant, 1976; Ray, 1983; Rose, 1971; Sangroula, 2018; Simkhada, 2018). However, my thesis does not endeavour to contribute further to these already extensively researched areas. Rather, it delves into the types of knowledge produced in such contexts, the relationships and differences between this 'new' knowledge and older paradigms, and the extent to which the spectres of the colonial 'third party' persist.

Objectively speaking, scholars and intellectuals of New China did not make substantial strides in re-contextualising Nepal-China interactions in terms of discovering new sources or developing novel historiographical methodologies, in contrast to their counterparts from the Republic period. Indeed, the works of this new era are more systematic, referencing multilingual resources and undertaking meticulous cross-checking of historical materials. However, they largely continue to adhere to Zhang's static etic perspective, focusing on interactions and exchanges symbolised by a few emblematic cultural envoys (for prototypical examples, please refer to the works of Ying, 1956; Chen, 1961; Huang, 1962). These scholars also strive to homogenise and essentialise the ambiguous history of trans-regional interactions, attempting to distil clear and quantifiable solutions to historical complexities within a dominant framework.

In August 1955, Nepal and China formalised their diplomatic relationship. Preceding this by a few months was the Bandung Conference, in which both Nepal and China participated. The Bandung Conference was more than a political convening aimed at fostering dialogue among former colonies with diverse historical, political, economic, cultural, and social conditions. It represented "a multi-lingual, multi-cultural, and multi-faceted process with innate fragility as well as a longstanding legacy that continues to influence the Global South" (Liu and Zhou, 2019: 141-142). One of its enduring legacies was the endeavour to revive forgotten friendships, thus structuring a broader set of Afro-Asian literary, historical, and diplomatic discourses (Chin, 2021). Within this context, figures such as Fa Xian, Xuan Zang, Wang Xuance, Princess Bhrikuti, and Arniko were lauded as esteemed cultural envoys, their significant roles in facilitating exchanges and fostering unity between two distinct countries being celebrated, despite the ambiguity and contentious nature of the historical materials upon which their status as icons was predicated. The credibility of these cultural icons is not merely academic constructs, but is also sustained through various conferences, meetings, and banquets where they have been leveraged to evoke the illustrious past of these two ancient nations[7].

Both Republic scholars such as Zhang Xilin and his contemporaries working for the PRC, despite operating under different contexts, have shown a remarkable focus on regional local experiences, materials, and information when documenting the shared history of Nepal and China. Such writing is, on the one hand, praiseworthy. To a large extent, it endeavours to shatter the constraints imposed on the region by imperial and colonial forces. By rejecting the alien knowledge structure, it contributes to the knowledge-making of the Nepali and Chinese people. Furthermore, it is significantly effective in nurturing, solidifying, and sustaining the friendship that is essential for both Nepal and China. Nonetheless, as I have thus far analysed, instead of blindly celebrating these so-called achievements, our focus should lie more on the extent to which these efforts have realised their decolonial objectives, or whether they have inadvertently reinforced coloniality.

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[7] Due to word constraints, I cannot cite all the aforementioned opening remarks here. For readers intrigued by the role these ancient cultural envoys have played in fostering more profound discussions between the state leaders of Nepal and China on various occasions, Bhasin's (2005) comprehensive compilation of official Nepal-China documents from 1947 to 2005 serves as an excellent starting point. For readers proficient in Chinese, relevant articles in the People's Daily (Ch. ren min ri bao) from the 1950s to 1960s are recommended. Those who can read Nepali should consult pamphlets and books published by the Royal Nepali government.

Moreover, coloniality is not the only hegemonic power we need to scrutinise when reconsidering the historical process of knowledge production about Nepal. More concretely, abstract coloniality manifests in more interactive forms within the region, such as the nation-state, which directly wields controlling power. The endeavour to write a shared history of Nepal and China for the modern Nepali and Chinese nation-states is fraught with difficulties as it is selective, generalising, and unempirical. It spotlights contacts in their most pure and innocent forms, aiming to portray a "monolithic ('Nepal') and a monolithic 'China' as opposed to dynamic geographies of cross-cultural knowledge and habitation" (Lee, 2021). This writing is both inclusive and exclusive; by including Nepal and China in the form of nation-states into a shared past, it simultaneously excludes numerous transcultural trajectories that do not neatly fit within its scope. This process further morphs the Nepal-China contact zone into an empty vessel, rather than a field teeming with dynamics, flows, pauses, conflicts, and struggles. The zone is adorned with symbols and rhetoric of development, communications, projects, and cooperation under the auspices of national actors and their pawns. This perspective reveals the ultimate argument and inquiry of this thesis: how can we genuinely decolonise the knowledge of areas, and understand their subjectivity, if we continue to use languages that mask this subjectivity? If an alternative method of writing the contact zone's past lies in the future, we should, at the very least, approach it "as part of a history of consecratory discourses," not "as a natural fact" (Chin, 2021: 3).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has examined the intricate historical and cultural interactions between Nepal and China, uncovering the inherent complexity and chaos within these relationships. Each historical trajectory, from *Lin'er guo*, *jia wei luo wei*, *ni po luo*, *ba le bu*, *kuo er ka* to *ni bo er*, represents a unique path that has been conditioned, shaped, and sustained by various contexts. These trajectories collectively form an irregular fabric, woven together by different histories, religions, cultures, and worldviews.

The chapter has also underscored the significant impact of colonialism on these interactions, with colonial forces fundamentally altering the underlying logic and hierarchy of knowledge production in the contact zone. This force is so potent that even decades after direct colonisation has receded from the contact zone, coloniality remains the most pervasive form of domination there today (Quijano, 2007). As Maldonado-Torres (2007: 243) aptly puts it, "In a way, as

modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day." However, these colonial forces have consistently faced resistance from local contenders who sought to assert their own subjectivity through the writing of transnational history.

In light of these findings, it becomes clear that we must embrace the complexity and chaos, recognising that they are not signs of incapability but rather the result of a transcultural and de-centralising approach to each unique historical trajectory. As this thesis progresses, it is crucial to continue scrutinising various forms of interactions with a critical eye, acknowledging the enduring impact of any hegemonic power, such as colonialism, while also recognising the resilience and agency of local heterogeneous forces. Only by doing so can we hope to gain a more nuanced understanding of the Nepal-China contact zone and its ongoing evolution.

Based on the historical analysis conducted in this chapter, the examination in this thesis will transition to the contemporary period in the next chapter. It will investigate the emerging tourist contact between modern Nepal and China through the lens of low-end globalisation. This will map out the general environments of the modern Nepal-China contact zone, paving the way for a more comprehensive analysis in subsequent chapters. Rather than approaching Chinese tourism in Nepal as an unproblematic entity comprising cultural and economic activities, the next short chapter aims to contextualise it with other forms and conditions of (im)mobility. This will reveal how, as part of the larger picture of low-end globalisation, it enables and is poised to enable various forms of trans-Himalayan direct contact.

Chapter Three The Flow of Chinese Tourism to Nepal and Grassroots Globalisation

Figure 4 The Chungking Mansion in Hongkong (Huang, 2017)

Figure 5 Chinese walking in Thamel, Nepal (Mulmi, 2021)

For approximately two decades from the 1990s, the dynamics of the contact zone between Nepal and China did not substantially alter. State-controlled power largely dictated these dynamics. Few Chinese nationals from mainland China visited Nepal, and even fewer Nepalis ventured to their northern neighbour. Aside from the sporadic exchange of high-level delegations, most interactions between the two states were confined to the countries' borderlands. These borderlands overlap with China's ethnic minority regions, which are geographically distant and economically detached from its metropolitan centres. The exploration of the southwestern borderlands by contemporary Han Chinese actors began relatively late, with critical routes and infrastructures facilitating such flows either non-existent or existing in different forms.

A transformation of this contact zone's dynamics began in the first decade of the twenty-first century when private Chinese tourists commenced their travels to Nepal in various forms. This nascent tourist influx was sanctioned by the states. In 1999, a revised cultural cooperation treaty, superseding the one signed in 1964, was agreed between Nepal and China, incorporating tourism as a cooperative domain (MFAPCR,1999). By 2000, China had officially recognised Nepal as an outbound tourism destination. In 2001, China Travel Service, a state-owned enterprise, established its branch office in Kathmandu (Wang, 2010). Nevertheless, the flow of Chinese tourists to Nepal did not ensue immediately. Only about a decade later did Chinese tourism gradually gain prominence in Nepal.

Numerous domestic factors in both countries, coupled with international events, contributed to the rise of Chinese tourism in Nepal, making it a nexus of various transnational activities.

Generally, it was a tumultuous decade for Nepal. On December 24, 1999, an Indian Airline aircraft en route to Delhi from Kathmandu was hijacked, significantly reducing the influx of Indian tourists to Nepal (Shrestha and Shrestha, 2012). Around two years later, Kathmandu's streets were abuzz with conspiracy theories surrounding the massacre of the Nepali royal family (see Lecomte-Tilouine, 2016). Moreover, the civil war between the Nepali government and the Maoist armed force was intensifying. This turmoil was further complicated by the post-9/11 global impact, culminating in a problematic era for Shangri-la (Thapa, 2003). With a noticeable decline in the number of Western tourists, the Nepali tourism market began to explore alternative Asian markets as Western-oriented adventure tourism waned (Bhattarai et al., 2005). Nepal's Twelfth National Development Plan (2010-12) emphasised the need for its tourism industry to focus significantly on neighbouring countries, primarily China and India (Nepal and Karst, 2017).

Around this time, the second wave of Chinese outbound tourism emerged (Arlt, 2013), seeking source markets beyond Europe and North America (Jørgensen et al., 2017). This shift in Chinese outbound tourism was driven by the rapidly growing urban middle class in China seeking an alternative path to modernity. This alternative quest was not solely dictated by the allure of modern urban landscapes but was invigorated by a fascination with natural and idyllic landscapes, embodying elements of counter-modernity. Capitalising on the Chinese state's efforts to strengthen the connectivity of the western borderlands with other parts of China through infrastructure development and commercialisation of ethnic minority cultures, urban middle-class Chinese tourists, predominantly of Han ethnicity, sought out counter-modern exoticism in ethnic minority regions like Xinjiang, Xizang (Tibet), and Yunnan. As these destinations became tainted by the progression and institutionalisation of domestic tourism, some trend-setting urban Han Chinese tourists turned their attention to more 'remote', 'underdeveloped', and less commercialised locations, following the traditional configuration of China's borderlands, with Nepal emerging as a new destination. This shift in Chinese tourism encapsulates global trends through the lens of Nepal within a novel paradigm that, while continuing the exoticisation of the Himalayan country, is buttressed by local historical traditions, trans-regional politics, economic disparities, and cultural references, and diverges from the Eurocentric Shangri-la narrative.

The trickle of Chinese tourists to Nepal quickly evolved into a substantial flow. The usage of the term "flow" in conjunction with Chinese tourists to Nepal is not an original construct of

this thesis. This concept is primarily derived from various news articles and official speeches collected during the fieldwork, where the term "flow of Chinese tourists" is a recurrent theme (e.g. Himalayan News Service, 2019; Mengjie, 2018; MOFAGOVNP, 2018; TKP, 2015; Xie, 2022). In these archives, this term primarily serves to underscore the surge of Chinese tourists in Nepal. For many, the flow is closely tied to the improvement of infrastructural connectivity of railways, motor roads, and airlines, whose enhancement primarily hinges on state-led initiatives. Moreover, these works evidently intend to present the flow within a contextless space, constituted solely by inanimate policies, capitals, technologies, and ideas, as many of them discuss how the Nepali tourism market contemplates improving its infrastructure (hardware) and service quality (software), adapting to the needs of Chinese tourism.

I propose that framing the flow of Chinese tourists to Nepal within the space of flows, which encompasses "material arrangements [that] allow for the simultaneity of social practices without territorial contiguity" (Castells, 1999: 295), can be problematic. By proclaiming "Chinese are coming" (TKP, 2015), these works may aptly capture the dramatic, sudden increase in the number of Chinese tourists visiting Nepal. However, their attempts to portray Chinese tourists to Nepal as an "unbroken, agentless" (Rockefeller, 2011: 560) entity, by integrating the movements of numerous disparate actors into a comprehensive view of flows, overlook crucial aspects of the practice of flows, such as the varied social costs (Bude and Dürrschmidt, 2010) of mobility borne unequally by different actors during the processes. This prevailing narrative, which portrays the tourist movements between Nepal and China as homogeneous and abstract flows, paints an overly simplified picture, reducing the humanistic aspects of Chinese tourism to Nepal, including motivations, practices, affect, and bodily experiences, to mere statistics.

A more in-depth, contextualised analysis of the so-called flow of Chinese tourists would reveal that they are far from homogeneous, uniform, autonomous, faceless, agentless, and strictly state-controlled. For instance, Chinese tourists are not a monolithic group visiting Nepal with the same motivations, originating from the same backgrounds, and engaging in the same activities. They represent a wide array of individuals, including middle-class leisure seekers, backpackers, mountaineers, Buddhist pilgrims, aimless wanderers, daigouers (see Martin, 2017), and illegal sojourners, among others, often with overlapping identities. Categorising these diverse actors within the same flow can therefore be misleading. Even though many of them may utilise similar routes and rely on the same infrastructures, it does not imply that they

move within the same flow. It is more accurate to say that the flow encompasses and facilitates the movements of different actors.

Moreover, the implication of flow as quick, effortless, and seamless movements does not accurately represent the experiences of many Chinese travellers to Nepal. The modes of transportation, travel frequency, travel duration, and travel experience/knowledge differ markedly among Chinese travellers in Nepal. Chinese tourists who travel by plane, arranged by reputable tourist agents, and stay in full licensed hotels in Nepal represent a privileged group compared to their compatriots who travel to Nepal via jeeps on dangerous mountain roads, wander in the chaotic New Chinatown of Kathmandu, and stay in modestly furnished rooms in budget hotels. The key point is that many Chinese people, including tourists, do not simply "flow" to Nepal. Instead, they "bump awkwardly along the pathways they create, backtrack, grate, move off in new directions, propelled by different intersecting logics" (Knowles, 2014: 7).

Furthermore, adopting such a holistic perspective inadvertently narrows down the concept of travel, confining it to the duration of the journey while ignoring its connections to periods of time and spaces beyond this timeframe, such as the time spent at home. In an attempt to break away from the stark contrast between the extraordinary tourist period and mundane everyday life, some scholars (e.g. MacCannell, 2001; Mertena et al., 2022; Tsaur et al., 2010) propose that tourist experiences, knowledge, and skills are extensions of people's routine lives. Moreover, as these scholars critically review the concept of flow in general (Hannam et al., 2006; Smith, 1996; Sheller, 2014), they argue that it overlooks the dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility by overemphasising the moving aspects. In the case of Chinese tourism in Nepal, many movements are in fact instigated, shaped, and sustained by forms of immobility. As I will later demonstrate, numerous Chinese people's visits to Nepal are prompted by their immobile circumstances in the gradually stratified Chinese society. Typically from underprivileged or even marginalised backgrounds in China, these individuals are compelled to move to Nepal in search of better opportunities. By leveraging the flexible identity of a Chinese tourist, they mobilise their bodies and other resources at an affordable cost. Their movements occur, pause, halt, and restart, generally mediated by types of tourism-related services, such as restaurants, accommodations, agents, groceries, and currency exchange, that are provided by other Nepal-based Chinese people, who are also seeking better opportunities abroad.

It is crucial to clarify that these critiques do not intend to completely disregard the value of the concept of the flow of Chinese tourism. Rather, these revisions aim to invigorate the concept by adding complexity to it. A concept aspiring to be a pure flow, which is manifested in abstract numbers, generalised political statements, development plans, and dominated by transnational markets and states, facilitated by technologies, experts, policies, and legal agreements, is artificially simplified. This tendency to homogenise the movements of people, goods, and information across borders, giving primary attention to powerful stakeholders of globalisation, such as multinational corporations and states, fails to adequately capture how these movements are experienced differently by more vulnerable actors under various conditions and at different times. To complete the rest of the picture, we must ground the concept of flow, and pay attention to its "shadow" aspect, the informal transnational connectivity which is less regulated by the state, more interpersonal, physical, and reciprocal (Hung and Ngo, 2020). As implied by the shadow metaphor, this type of informal exchange network does not exist separately from the 'formal' and 'legal' businesses. They exist, in many cases, as different facets of the same entity, and the observation of the entity will not be comprehensive without this complete set of facets. In the context of the Nepal-China contact zone, many shadow businesses operate under the same conditions that facilitate their regulated counterparts. However, as many people experience, shadows are always incomplete, fragmented, distorted, shifting, uneven in greyscale, and most importantly, contingent on the surfaces they are projected upon. Therefore, shadow interactions are disjointed, unstable, grounded, and grassroots, constituting smaller paths of globalisation from below (Appadurai, 2000) or low-end globalisation (Mathews, 2011, 2007).

Before launching into another in-depth, abstract exploration of the heterogeneous aspects of globalisation, I offer some concrete examples of what these might look like in the Nepal-China contact zone.

Situated discreetly in Sundhara, a sort of central commercial area of Kathmandu, stands a four-story commercial complex named China Town Shopping Centre (CTSC). Transformed from a short-lived grand hotel about two decades ago, CTSC serves as a terrestrial transnational node connecting Nepali merchants, Chinese manufacturers, and Indian mass-group tourists. As the shopping centre's manager explained, CTSC has long passed its prime, with most of its current clientele being Indian tourists attracted by the cheap (usually equating to poor quality) made-

in-China products available in the complex. Shopping at CTSC is included in the travel package offered by some Indian travel agents. Regular buses arrive at its entrance from India, and these same buses will take the Indian customers to other tourist attractions in the Valley once their hands are full of cheap products purchased from the shopping centre. The extreme affordability, rather than a proper balance between the products' inexpensive price and average quality, becomes the chief draw of those items sold in CTSC. Many of the products I encountered at CTST during fieldwork were counterfeit commodities of globally renowned brands such as Adidas, Nike, Louis Vuitton and The North Face, just to name a few. Some of these counterfeit commodities only cost around one-hundredth of the prices of their 'authentic' counterparts. For example, in CTSC, a North Face jacket only costs 160 rupees (around 1 pound). At such a low price, customers will not expect high quality. Although I was not fortunate enough to interview any customers at CTSC, a stall owner admitted to me that all the customers there were drawn to the cheap products and did not care about the quality. "Even if they find the products soon broken when they are home, what can they do?" he joked, "they will not return to Nepal just for a jacket" (personal interview, 2020). The import process of CTSC's products from China's south-eastern provinces to Nepal's capital shares a similar narrative. As another store owner illustrated, it involves complicated bureaucratic paperwork, several intermediaries, physical travels, and time-consuming logistical transportation. It is almost unlikely they can return the products to Chinese manufacturers once they arrive in Kathmandu.

Figure 6 The gate to Chinatown Shopping Centre, sponsored by the Chinese Embassy (my picture, 2020)

Figure 7 The 'fake' jackets hang along the corridor (my picture, 2020)

Quality products and efficient customer service are not unattainable in Kathmandu, but they come at a significantly higher cost. Just about 2 kilometres north of CTSC, in an officially licensed retail store of North Face, a jacket of similar style is priced at a steep 13,900 rupees

(approximately 90 pounds). So, who are the targeted customers for this 90-pound jacket? The store's location provides a clue. Just a few steps from this authorised retailer lies the entrance to the Thamel district, Nepal's traditional tourist hub, a place where global and local explorers intersect, and "what these seekers find has as much to do with their own imaginings as any reality" (Thapa, 2016: 7). For nearly thirty years, Thamel's largest group of patrons has primarily been Western tourists, hikers, and climbers who have shaped the district's identity. Thus, it is not surprising that a licensed retailer of professional outdoor activity equipment is located nearby. However, while this store has remained essentially unchanged, the scenes in Thamel have significantly evolved.

Situated at the entrance of Thamel is a large pharmacy store. At first glance, its Chinese-character advertisements and signboards set it apart from local *ausadhi pasala* (pharmacies) found scattered around the city. A closer examination reveals that rather than being an ordinary pharmacy, this one is a transit stop for medicine imports and exports, and its primary products include made-in-India anticancer medicines, Minoxidil topical solution, India-imported Himalaya health care products, and medicines for enhancing male sexual function.

Symbolically, this unconventional pharmacy guards the entrance to the bustling world of Thamel. Over the past decade, Chinese actors have increasingly participated in the local market dynamics, and according to some scholars (Linder, 2019; Sharma, 2019, 2018), have contributed to Thamel's transformation into the city's unofficial Chinatown. The following rough sketch illustrates the breadth and diversity of Chinese actors and businesses involved in this emerging 'Chinatown' and how the district's viewscape, soundscape, and even smellscape are reshaped accordingly.

A few stores down from the pharmacy is a shop selling cashmere products touted as handmade with one hundred percent cashmere. In its confined space, some Chinese daigouers, individual trade men and women, standing in front of multiple smartphones, energetically promote Nepali cashmere products to their home-based customers using sophisticated online streaming techniques. Next to these online marketers, the Nepali store owner is engaged with some Chinese tourists eager to haggle over a 20 RMB yuan (approximately 2 pounds) discount on every product they plan to purchase. At a corner of the store, a large pile of neatly packed jumpers and scarves are amassed, ordered by Chinese customers via online platforms, awaiting

delivery to the Chinese SF Express centre on the same street to be dispatched to various destinations in China.

Not far from the express centre is a budget hotel managed by Chinese investors, where affordable Chinese food and rooms are available. In addition to tourists leisurely strolling along Thamel's streets, many young Chinese people, who are only in Kathmandu for a short stay, walk briskly. After leaving their purchased goods at the hotel, they hunt for a Chinese hotpot restaurant, or take taxis to visit Kathmandu's casinos, where free beverages and food are unlimited. Vehicles are parked along the street, including expensive imported jeeps owned by Chinese expatriates sent by big companies, and local taxis. Local taxi drivers tend not to prioritise Chinese passengers these days. However, some of them still ask the Chinese for a fare that is almost double what they would charge locals. Interestingly, many Chinese, drawing either from their living experience in Kathmandu or travelling tips they glean from online guidebooks, skilfully negotiate for half of the asked price.

Figure 8 A 'multi-functional' convenience store in Thamel (my picture, 2019)

Figure 9 A crowded store of cashmere products (my picture, 2020)

The narrative provided herein offers a comprehensive elucidation of the dynamic, heterogeneous, minimally regulated, and fundamentally rooted transnational movements materialising between (and beyond) Nepal and China. These movements encapsulate the essence of alternative paradigms of globalisation that are orchestrated at the grassroots or 'from below' (Appadurai, 2000). According to Appadurai (ibid: 3), this perspective of 'grassroot globalisation' or 'globalisation from below' is pivotal for safeguarding "a democratic and autonomous standing in respect to the various forms by which global power further seeks to extend its dominion." In his conception, NGOs, specifically those with international tasks, objectives, and strategies, and transnational advocacy networks are the principal contributors to this grassroots globalisation.

It is vital to clarify, however, that grassroots globalisation does not act in opposition to globalisation per se (Falk, 1997). Instead, its function is to shift focus towards often overlooked, discriminated against, or even criminalised spaces, individuals, organisations, social movements, and network activities, all of which have consistently served as active dynamics of global processes (Neubauer, 2009; Novelli, 2006; Pleyers, 2008; Porta et al., 2006; Robins and Lieres, 2004). Building upon Appadurai's conceptualisation of disjuncture, Gordon Mathews (2007: 169-170) posits the exploration of low-end globalisation. This refers to "the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes quasi-legal or illegal transactions, commonly associated with the

developing world" on a "people-to-people scale." To embody and embed this concept of the "non-hegemonic world system" (Ribeiro, 2012), Mathews (2007; 2011) elected the infamous Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, and later extended to Guangzhou, Southern China (Mathews et al., 2017).

Mathews' approach, in alignment with Mendieta's advocacy (2001: 23), underscores the necessity to focus on "the below of the poor and destitute, the below of those who are not seen, and do not register in the radar of social theory." He aspires to capture micro-level ethnographic instances of "the dominant form of globalisation experienced in much of the developing world today" (Matthews, 2011: 40). However, a multitude of scholars have underscored that low-end globalisation is not confined to the developing areas (see Bacchetta et al., 2009; Benton-Short et al., 2005; Fonseca and Malheiros, 2004; Koh and Malecki, 2016; Mohan and Zack-Williams, 2002; Tu Huynh, 2016; Wark, 2002; Zack, 2015; Zi, 2015). It embodies the transgression, contestation, challenge, and compromise of various social, economic, and cultural norms and borders (Huynh, 2016) that concurrently connect and divide the globe. Therefore, low-end globalisation penetrates locations and populations that high-end globalisation fails to reach, particularly where people's ideas and attitudes towards legality, formal written agreements, and social practices often deviate (Matthews et al., 2017).

One salient contribution of the studies of globalisation from below is the acknowledgement of the asymmetrical, and often unjust and exploitative, globalised economic systems, as well as the vulnerable positions that countries and areas in the semi-peripheries and extreme peripheries (Matthews, 2011) are subjected to. Yet, it also illuminates the fact that occupying a structurally disadvantaged position does not preclude these exploited actors from exercising initiative and subjectivity. These studies unveil the individuals and systems that are consciously silenced and regulated by Western-dominated high-end globalisations, thereby offering novel perspectives on processes that are ubiquitously experienced worldwide, yet which have been largely dismissed at the epistemological level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the complex dynamics of low-end globalisation within the Nepal-China contact zone, emphasising the transnational flow of people, goods, and information. It has illuminated the often-overlooked 'shadow interactions' that coexist

alongside formal and legal businesses, underscoring their disjunctive, unstable, and grounded characteristics. The chapter has further scrutinised the role of tourism, specifically Chinese tourism to Nepal, as a significant facet of these transnational movements. It has demonstrated that these movements extend beyond abstract numbers or political statements and are experienced in diverse ways by different actors, often within mundane, everyday contexts. The chapter has also underscored the importance of understanding the 'underside' of globalisation - the spaces, people, and activities that are frequently neglected or criminalised, yet remain active contributors to global processes. It has shown that while these actors may be situated in disadvantaged positions, they are not devoid of agency and can exert influence within the globalised world. Finally, the chapter has advocated for a more nuanced understanding of the globalising process of the Nepal-China contact zone, one that acknowledges the asymmetrical and often exploitative nature of global economic systems, yet also recognises the initiatives and subjectivity of those positioned within them. It calls for a shift in focus from high-end to low-end globalisation, from the formal to the shadow, from the powerful to the vulnerable. The purpose of this has been in order to capture a more comprehensive picture of the global processes that shape in-between spaces.

The subsequent two chapters select the contemporary Chinese tourist flow to Nepal as their primary point of analysis. This choice is informed by empirical observations from my fieldwork, which suggest that the transnational tourist flow, in terms of infrastructures, actors, scopes, routes, and boundaries, widely overlaps and coexists with many other forms of mobility and immobility. Therefore, the study of tourist flow can offer insights into many other non-tourist actors and activities. Moreover, the tourist flow serves as an in-between nexus of homogenous and heterogeneous global, state, and individual forces, as the practice of travelling is not only private but also historical, cultural, and societal. Furthermore, travelling channels transformative, constructive, and destructive powers. Therefore, the focus on travelling practices aligns with the advocacy to examine how travelling, by linking many other actions and practices of human organisations, shapes process geographies (Appadurai, 2000). Rhetorically, the illustration of contemporary Chinese travellers and their practices in Nepal is a reflective continuation of the travel-centred tradition of discourses about Nepal-China relations. Among all the travelling practices, the chapters prioritise writing, reading, interpreting, and circulating types of travelogues. These are not only seen as a set of "tourist skills" (Mertena et al., 2022) but also as a significant means to represent and further configure a paradise-like Nepal for contemporary Chinese tourists.

Chapter Four The Dangers of a Single Shangri-la

Figure 10 A collection of covers of Chinese books on Nepal

The composite images showcased above present a variety of contemporary Chinese book covers related to Nepal. The genesis of my interest in these covers, along with the conceptual foundation for this chapter's title, stems from a collective discourse on Twitter in 2014. During this discourse, participants explored the conspicuous similarities between book covers about various non-Western regions, typified by symbols such as African acacia trees and sunsets, and veiled women representing the Middle East (Ross, 2014). Intriguingly, this dialogue mirrors a TED talk delivered earlier that year by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014), who eloquently critiqued the risk of reducing diverse locations, cultures, and populations to a unidimensional narrative—a phenomenon she termed "the danger of a single story". Adichie further highlights the omnipotent control that shapes the storytellers, their storytelling techniques, and the scale and timing of their narratives, thereby facilitating the construction of an authoritative narrative for individuals.

Independent of their respective genres, these book covers exhibit a striking similarity in design, distinguished by a restricted set of quintessential 'Nepali' symbols. These include snow-capped mountains, Hindu ascetic monks, grandiose Buddhist stupas, palaces and temples, as well as the faces of young girls. Such recurring symbolism serves as an indicator of a prevailing single story that eclipses other narratives about Nepal within the contact zone. This narrative depicts Nepal as an enduring terrestrial paradise—a steadfast antithesis to the conventional understanding of modern life. This prevailing narrative has been termed under various nomenclatures, with "Shangri-la" being the most prevalent. The unyielding quest for Shangri-la by outsiders not only confines Nepal's local identity—both semiotically and materially—but also constrains its own potentialities. As eloquently put forth by (Lopez, 2018), we are all, metaphorically, "prisoners of Shangri-la."

The term Shangri-la, first introduced in James Hilton's (2015) novel as the name of a fictional place purportedly located in Tibet, has over time evolved into a profound cultural symbol encapsulating the enigma and allure of the Orient. The fictive placement of Shangri-la in Tibet has facilitated the international misappropriation of other Himalayan regions, including Nepal, as tangible incarnations of this imagined, elusive locale. This process of bestowing a unique "order of meaning" (Bishop, 1989: 5) upon Nepal has been shaped and perpetuated by two concurrent and interrelated phenomena in the domains of physical exploration and literary depictions. Commencing with European colonial expansion, it was further fuelled by the influx of Western tourists into Nepal beginning in the 1950s. Mirroring and extrapolating from the

material world, a vast array of literature on this land—including scientific exploration (e.g. Le Bon, 2014; Powell, 1929) and the search for life-altering inspiration (e.g., Han, 1958; Greenwald, 1990; Selby, 2008)—portray it as an enigmatic, temporally displaced, and forbidden land. Kathmandu is often depicted as a spiritual domain where death is treated with an unusual sense of intimacy and acceptance (Pešić, 1982, translated and cited in Tomas, 2015). Consequently, Shangri-la has emerged as a transnational emblem of humanity's conscious and unconscious projections of alternate realities—projections that are primarily manipulated by the more powerful entities in asymmetrical relationships, thereby silencing alternative voices. Within the context of this thesis, Shangri-la take on two distinct interpretations. The narrow and essentialist interpretation aligns with Hilton's original novel and its ensuing cultural adaptations. The broader and more constructive interpretation views Shangri-la as a transcultural process of projecting onto other societies to mirror the transformations, challenges, and upheavals occurring within one's own society. I will expand on this further below.

An investigation into how Nepal is construed as Shangri-la within the ambit of contemporary Chinese tourism is not merely a reassertion of an entrenched status quo. Rather, as the concept is circulated, translated, and reinterpreted in evolving texts and contexts, each iteration uniquely reflects its specific circumstances. How does contemporary Chinese tourism in Nepal shape Nepal as Shangri-la? What continuities and nuances emerge as this traditional representation traverses new geographies, temporalities, and encounters with diverse stakeholders? How is the concept of Shangri-la reimagined, reinterpreted, and enacted by various Nepali and Chinese actors throughout its continuous evolution? Beyond Shangri-la, do these new Asian actors introduce alternative paradigms or conceptual models to redefine Nepal and, reflexively, themselves? If so, what elements change and what remains constant?

Such imaginative constructs encompass not only the 'objective' aspects of the recipient society, such as architecture and inhabitants, but are also moulded and mediated by the tourists' 'subjective' perceptions. In this context, objectivity and subjectivity intertwine within a multitude of networks—historical, socio-economic, and cultural, among others—operating in their respective domains. Tourism practices blend these potentially discrete elements, thereby implying that the interpretation of these tourist representations calls for more than merely a semiotic analysis. From (Barthes, 1972) to (Foucault, 1980) to Hall (1997), despite their theoretical divergences, a common underlying thread that aids our comprehensive understanding of various representations is, as summarised by (Gledhill, 1997: 339), that

"representations address us in the practices of everyday life even while calling on our subjective sense of self and our fantasies." In a more Foucauldian context, "Practice follows discourse, while discourse is generated by practices" (Miyoshi, 1993: 726). Hence, decoding contemporary Chinese tourist discourses about Nepal requires acknowledging the interplay of language, practice, ideologies, histories, and cultures. This interplay forms a significant aspect of the influx and circulation of Chinese tourists in and around Nepal, a subject of vital importance to this thesis.

"Come to Nepal if you are looking for happiness." - setting the tone before travelling

This citation originates from a Nepali columnist's (Mulmi, 2020) observations on the impact of the Chinese commercial romance-comedy, *Deng Feng Lai* (DFL; Eng. *Up in the Wind*; 2013), produced in and about Nepal. While summarising the film's theme to elucidate how it has fostered Chinese tourism in Nepal since 2013[8], Mulmi also suggests that the era of visiting "a place without roads, without hotels and without phones" (ibid) has passed, thereby urging both the state and the tourism industry to enhance the country's infrastructure for sustainable development. Although Mulmi's interpretation of the Chinese film's essence is accurate, his perception arguably undervalues the importance and appeal of Nepal's natural, less-industrialised, and somewhat less-developed state to outside visitors.

The intersection of tourism and development, or *bikas* in the local context, has a deep-seated history in Nepal. The inaugural group of foreign tourists visited Nepal in 1955, marking a significant milestone in the nation's timeline. The infancy of tourism development in Nepal, much like many other developmental initiatives in the country, relied heavily on the West. All of the initial tourists hailed from European and North American countries. Throughout its evolution, tourism has remained integral to the state's national development strategies, and the Nepali government has maintained close cooperation with European partners such as France and Germany (Liechty, 2017; Stevens, 1988). *Bikas* conveys to the state and its populace a vision of "a secret passage to material paradise" (Shrestha, 1995: 270), defined predominantly by Western standards in a post-colonial world. This ethos promotes an ideology of social progress centred on modernisation (Pigg, 1992) which presupposes that all states and nations,

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[8] In part due to the promotional efforts of this film, the year 2013 marked a significant milestone in tourism history as it recorded the first instance of more than a hundred thousand Chinese tourists (113,173 to be exact) visiting Nepal, an increase from the 71,861 recorded in the previous year (Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2020).

despite their diverse local contexts, have the potential to participate in a universal race, evaluated by identical standards. Hence, Mulmi's view of tourism-driven *bikas* as a catalyst for development, potentially facilitating infrastructure improvements, should come as no surprise.

Nevertheless, what some individuals perceive as material progress, others might interpret as intrusive and destructive to the environment. During a conference in Kathmandu, in response to a local participant's proposal to develop a modern tourist trail tracing her father's journey, the daughter of a renowned Western scholar who had actively engaged in numerous Nepali development projects voiced her opposition. She cited the extensive environmental harm she had observed in recent decades, attributing it to the pursuit of so-called modern development. This sentiment is not exclusive to Western observers. Despite Mulmi's Chinese associates expressing their desire for improved infrastructure in Nepal, my personal interactions with various Chinese visitors suggest that they likely only refer to enhancements in tourism infrastructure, such as smoother, less dusty roads connecting tourist sites, as opposed to advocating for a complete modernisation of Nepal.

DFL, set against the backdrop of Nepal's renowned tourist destinations, narrates the experiences of urban Chinese tourists seeking relief from everyday anxieties, and ultimately, paths to happiness while travelling across the country. Nepal is consistently portrayed in this film, and in numerous other contemporary Chinese cultural productions, as a land of promise, fulfilling mankind's most profound pursuits, including happiness. This counter-modern discourse, constructed through a specific arrangement of Nepal's cultural and natural elements, while not a novel approach, is relatively fresh in the Nepal-China context. Utilising similar cultural and natural elements, traditional Chinese media extol Nepal's beauty and diversity as an independent ally in anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements (e.g. Gao, 1960), rather than a spiritual land of happiness. The trend in China to associate Nepal with a specific personal identity — a modern seeker striving to find tranquillity amidst stressful daily life — has largely emerged only since the early 21st century. I will shortly analyse this trend, which emerged as a consequence of China's southwestern border areas being transformed to cater to ethnic tourism, thereby attracting 'more modern' tourists from China's metropolitan centres.

On June 2, 2013, China Central Television Channel 4 broadcasted a roughly 45-minute talk show featuring a discussion between Kathmandu and Shangri-La. However, the Shangri-La discussed in this TV show does not refer to the Blue Moon Valley in James Hilton's novel, but

rather to a small county situated in Yunnan, a province along the PRC's southwestern borderland. Formerly known as Zhongdian, the county officially renamed itself Shangri-La in 2001, following years of campaigns and competitions, upon gaining approval from China's State Council. The rebranded county emphasises its Tibetan ethnic and Buddhist culture (for a comprehensive review of the renaming process, see Hillman, 2003; Llamas and Belk, 2011). Kolås (2004: 270) argues that this is also a process of sacralising and exoticising the Tibetan minority nationals of the PRC, who are considered "as representative of less 'advanced', more 'primitive', stages of social evolution" under the hegemonic framework of "eco-Buddhist Tibet" (Yü, 2011) that emerges under contemporary China's dominant discourse of Old Tibet and New Tibet (Yü, 2010).

By drawing comparisons between Kathmandu and Shangri-la county, the show attempts to position Nepal on a similar stage of an imagined linear social evolution. As the show suggests, both Kathmandu and Shangri-la are politically and economically disadvantaged yet culturally rich peripheral areas. These are "mysterious cities" with "rich religious atmospheres" that allow those "living in worldly societies and working hard to live, to feel a pure force" (City-to-City, 2013). The sharply contrasting discourse of "mysterious cities" versus "worldly societies" enables individuals from the latter to interpret the meaning of happiness. This interpretation is primarily situated within a natural, spiritual, and less industrialised context, sharing representations with primitivity and backwardness. For instance, when Mr. Dahal, the invited Nepali guest on the show, introduces *chiura*, the beaten rice, to the audience, a self-proclaimed Chinese male cultural expert comments:

> "Honestly, you can't say these two cities have gourmet cuisine. Why do I say that? Because they have their food traditions and food culture, but if you were to call them gourmet… *It is a bit simpler and cruder, and the taste isn't as mixed.* But this is actually a special trait unique to the cities of Shangri-la and Kathmandu. *They have a limited impact on their natural environment. … All they need is ... some curry, then a bowl of yogurt, then they will feel very happy.*" (Ibid; my italic)

In this commentary, the notions of simplicity, credulity, and intricacy serve two kinds of consciousness. The first presents Nepal as a nation in its primitive form, while the second sanctifies primitivity as the original state of life. Happiness, therefore, should be derived from

the primitive, essential and true face of life, which has been drastically disrupted by the complexities and artificialities of our familiar life.

Commentary analogous to that focused on Nepal has been extended to China's ethnic minority regions for some time, particularly in areas that spatially overlap with southwestern China. Dating back to the 1990s, numerous locations in southwestern China have witnessed a cultural resurgence. This resurgence has been primarily a strategy engineered to modernise the country's peripheral areas through a series of socio-political and economic projects, many of which revolve around the revitalisation of diverse minority ethnic cultures. A key component of these initiatives is the commercialisation of ethnic tourism, with Shangri-la County serving as a prototypical case of such projects and campaigns.

One notable consequence of these campaigns—and one also influenced by the significant socioeconomic disparities between China's western borders and its more developed urban areas—is the transformation of these previously remote regions into touristic sites representing ethnicity and tradition. These sites afford Chinese tourists from other parts of the country an opportunity to reassert their modern Chinese identities (Chow, 2005; Oakes, 1993; Walsh and Swain, 2004). This reassertion is facilitated through the reconfirmation of their leading positions within the development narrative. However, an influx of capital, tourists, and development projects aimed at modernising these ethnic cultural locales has gradually received criticism for engendering an environment that is overly commercial, crowded, and artificial. Subsequently, these areas no longer fulfil the ideal of remote, poetic places of refuge. Thus, Chinese tourists have begun seeking 'purer', more distant destinations to further validate their modern identities. The term 'far-flung', in this context, is not determined by geographic distance, but rather by one's degree of modernity. It is within this timeframe that Nepal emerged as an attractive destination for an increasing number of Chinese tourists.

The film DFL, released at the end of 2013, manages to resonate with the imaginations of a substantial number of urban Chinese individuals. It achieves this through its dramatic and romantic depiction of Nepal and its exploration of the theme of finding happiness in a distant location. The film is based on the novel *A Travelogue, or a Guidebook* (Bao, 2013), and it tells the story of a group of Chinese tourists, each finding their unique sense of happiness in Nepal.

Cheng Yumeng, the protagonist of the film, is a columnist for a fashion-lifestyle magazine based in Shanghai. Cheng embodies the gloss but emptiness that is characteristic of many young individuals navigating the rapidly evolving urban and social landscapes of contemporary China. These individuals often find themselves engaged in a strenuous endeavour to ascend society's hierarchical ladder. Cheng, through her intelligence and industriousness, soon reaps the rewards of her efforts when her company decides to dispatch her to Tuscany, Italy, to author a cover story for the magazine. Despite her excitement about the forthcoming travel to Europe—which, for her, epitomises her ideal of modern life—her plans take an unexpected turn. Her editor informs her that her trip to Tuscany has been reassigned to a group of the magazine's sponsors' children. As a consolation, Cheng is reassigned to Nepal, often referred to as the "Switzerland of the East" and noted for its high "happiness index" (DFL, 2013). Her assignment in Nepal is to unravel the mechanisms and reasons behind this elevated happiness index.

The initial fifteen minutes of the film establish the narrative trajectory for the subsequent developments. Cheng, oblivious to anything about Nepal apart from its notorious reputation for being backward and underdeveloped, embarks on her journey with profound reluctance. Furthermore, her travel arrangements sharply contradict her envisioned independence as a traveller, something she anticipated experiencing in Tuscany. She is consigned to a mass tourist group, resulting in an experience marked by mundane uniformity. The journey, primarily located in Kathmandu and Pokhara, appears to possess an uncanny ability to identify and validate all of Cheng's perceived injustices and unhappiness. It satisfies her anticipation of the trials that might arise when travelling in a less developed foreign land; dusty environments and power cuts serve as minor examples, causing the journey to starkly contrast with its advertised descriptor as a "Happy Tourist Group."

However, the film's core revelation is the discovery of happiness through achieving internal peace and reconciling with the perpetually changing, high-speed alienation characteristic of modern society. More specifically, it posits that this goal can be realised through adopting the Nepali lifestyle - a lifestyle portrayed as encapsulated within the pre-modern amber in the 21st century. Once the narrative shifts to Nepal, tracing the steps of Cheng and her fellow tourists, a visual tapestry inspired by popular culture's imagination of an isolated Himalayan country unfolds. Extraordinary tourist vistas, inclusive of Nepal's most popular and typical attractions, and unique tourist interactions are selectively normalised and essentialised. These are depicted

as the mundane everyday environments of the country and as locales accommodating counter-modern lifestyles. Local inhabitants are portrayed as living out a fictional pre-modern existence. This way of life patiently waits in situ, akin to a taciturn guru, ready to bestow wisdom upon those who seek it. For instance, within the film, Cheng's group encounters a Hindu guru during a yoga meditation session who dispenses wisdom reminiscent of comforting aphorisms: "one feels oneself dumb because one's soul is temporarily covered with a layer of dust. It will be fine. There will be a day the wind will come, and it will blow it all away" (Ibid). Consequently, the film excels at sanctifying commercial tourist products readily available in Nepal, and it is precisely through these repeatedly sanctified tourist encounters that Cheng discovers her personal happiness.

In the film's culmination, Cheng finds herself in Pokhara, where she decides to partake in paragliding, a form of extreme sport introduced to Nepal by Western tourists and often symbolising liberation from constraint. She intends this leap from the mountain to signify the conclusion of her journey and the commencement of a brave new future in China. Despite what may not have been the director's intention, the choice of paragliding—a seemingly dangerous sport with rigorously controlled and calculated risks (Ayazlar, 2015)—to express Cheng's ultimate enlightenment is both ironic and unflinchingly candid. It also subtly underscores the artificiality and performativity of modern Chinese tourists' pursuit of happiness, wherein the anti-modern risks associated with such travels, such as poor infrastructure, polluted environments, and human conflict, should be as controllable as they would be in a theme park. Within the film, Cheng waits near the cliff for favourable wind conditions for her flight. Impatience seizes her, and her typically reticent Nepali paragliding instructor transforms once again into a sage guru, advising patience until the right wind arrives.

In the original novel from which the film is adapted, the portrayal of the Nepali paragliding instructor as a guru is more pronounced:

> "The instructor suddenly leaned closer to my ears, speaking quite
> slowly and thoughtfully.
>
> 'No matter how anxious you are, or how afraid you are, we must not
> rush ourselves now. It is useless since it will not help you fly. What we
> can only do now is waiting for the wind quietly.'

I was shocked for several seconds, feeling something forcibly smoothed inside my body; something had been stuck there for quite a long time.

'Waiting for the wind?'

The instructor nodded, 'If you want to fly, courage alone will not help you. We have to pause for a while without thinking about anything, emptying ourselves. Waiting for wind is all we need.'" (Bao, 2013: 245; my translation and italic)

Wisdom emanating from ordinary individuals in a foreign land is not an unusual trope in narratives or cinematic depictions of exotic journeys, particularly for those familiar with such artistic portrayals of Nepal and the broader Himalayan region. As Cheng's narrative reaches its climax, both the film's director and the novel's author succumb to the potent Orientalist conception of Nepal, once more leading their Chinese audiences to Hilton's metaphorical Blue Moon Valley, where the secrets to happiness and remedies for wounds inflicted by modern development lie in quiet wait. Although Cheng is aware that the instructor is merely outlining basic paragliding principles, she cannot help but internalise these as self-reflective wisdom (Bao, 2013: 246).

Each traveller visiting Nepal carries their unique burdens, but they rarely actively seek answers. Instead, they meander, observe, and quietly form their philosophies. Enlightenment does not arrive through lengthy lectures; more often than not, they manifest suddenly, following a sequence of significant encounters. These revelations are the accumulation of numerous moments— a smile, a person, a conversation, or even a single word from the destination country. It is through these small, accumulated moments that the question arises: Is it the pursuit of happiness and inspiration in Nepal that makes it an essential rite of passage (Turner, 2017) in our lives? Or, is it Nepal's inherent, unspoken power that compels this pursuit? In any case, very few foreign visitors truly linger here. Like at the film's end, Cheng returns to her routine metropolitan life— albeit invigorated in spirit— recognising that the ultimate objective is "all about going home and fighting the same fight" (Tsui, 2014).

The Chinese tourists' experience in the film, akin to the fleeting passage of the wind through Nepal, may lead to questions about Nepal's response to these tourists and the traces they leave, if any. Unfortunately, the film does not provide insight into these questions. The narrative does engineer encounters between Chinese tourists and local people, symbolised by the role of a Nepali tourist guide, albeit played by a Chinese Tibetan actor. These interactions are guided by stereotypical dichotomies: modernity versus primitivity, atheism versus theism, and material versus nature. To emphasise the locals' devotion to deities, the film presents the Nepali guide as a defender of tradition, clashing with his Chinese patrons when a tourist shows disrespect to the controversial living goddess, Kumari. This imagined scenario is arguably unrealistic as it simultaneously overestimates the role of religion in local everyday life—portraying every local character as the utmost devout follower—and underestimates the power of money in tourist zones. From discussions with Nepali tourist practitioners, direct conflict with customers is a last resort. Disrespectful behaviour by Chinese tourists towards local cultures—such as creating humorous nicknames for sacred religious places—may cause discomfort but rarely escalates into significant issues. In fact, some guides even introduce these nicknames to Chinese tourists due to the difficulty of pronouncing and remembering the original names.

By depriving the host society of subjective expression, eliminating tangible social conflicts and hierarchical structures, and creating new portrayals for specific purposes, the version of Nepal illustrated in DFL reflects the Chinese mass imagination configuring Nepal as a theme park. The complex forces that shape the theme park are masked by a specific authenticity (Costa and Bamossy, 2001; Johnson, 1981). Further, as Kokai and Robson (2019) suggest, the construction of the theme park also involves tourists who traditionally have been theorised as passive experiencers. If Nepal, within and beyond the film, serves as a theme park of happiness for Chinese tourists, its ideological construction is more attributable to the foreign tourist culture than local design.

Historically, the power to discover or construct a place of happiness has been closely tied to European colonial expansion and the partitioning of the world for various purposes. This often forces upon regions identities and functions that they did not previously hold. Many renowned modern tourist destinations, such as the mysterious Orient, tropical beaches, or summer resorts, bear traces of colonial legacies (Demay, 2015; Mullan, 2020; Palmer, 1994; Tuck, 2019). The transitional processes overseen by colonial and imperial forces that have led to the current

image of many places are largely overlooked and taken for granted by modern visitors whose perceptions of places are intertwined with these historical forces.

The Chinese tourists' power to convert Nepal into their theme park of happiness is directly related to their customer-service provider relationship with Nepal. More profoundly, this power is informed by the rising nationalism within the PRC in recent years. A significant part of these nationalist discourses revolves around the achievements of modern development the state has attained, premised on the notion of surpassing European countries and the USA. While many Chinese people confidently discuss modernisation, they appear less innovative in challenging colonial arrangements of different places' roles. To a large extent, they inherit colonial knowledge to comprehend the world, including Nepal.

In summary, the Chinese ideological construction of Nepal as a counter-modern haven of happiness, as represented by the film DFL, is a co-product of nationalist pride in modernisation and social wounds that have emerged during the process of modernisation. While the former bestows confidence upon Chinese film audiences and tourists to explore foreign lands, it is the latter that drives them to destinations like Nepal, in search of the missing pieces of their modern identities.

Pratt (1992: 4) astutely notes that "important historical transitions alter the way people write because they alter people's experiences and the way people imagine, feel and think about the world they live in. The shifts in writing, then, will tell you something about the nature of the changes." Nearly every Chinese tourist I spoke to in Nepal had seen DFL, as well as many other films, books, and music pieces that associate Nepal with notions of happiness, peace, and timelessness. And these cultural artefacts and concepts bridge societies, fostering mutual expression, understanding, and reshaping. Films like DFL, cultivated in the soil of modernisation reflection in contemporary China, stimulate numerous Chinese tourists to visit Nepal. Throughout their journeys, they bring the narratives to varied personal contexts, interpreting and even creating new narratives.

With the advancement of internet technologies, these nascent cultural products - such as texts, images, and videos - can be simultaneously accessible to those already on their journeys and those who have not yet begun. This repeated translation, reproduction, and replication of

various tourist cultural productions have played a significant role in boosting the Chinese tourist flow to Nepal since the 2010s.

Therefore, the following section will delve into the analysis of one particular type of cultural product - the online user-generated travelogues - to examine the nuanced representations of Nepal. More importantly, I approach these travelogues as cultural practices rather than mere statistical texts, viewing them as platforms through which tourists express, feel, imagine, and think about the evolving world they inhabit.

Inventing Nepal in the cyberspace

The circulation of Nepal in cyberspace, primarily through user-generated travelogues, reflects a unique interplay of traditional and modern forms of storytelling, cultural exchange, and the continued growth of (dis)connectivity. Though DFL may not have achieved broad commercial success in the film market, it has had a significant impact on the Nepali tourist market as a powerful transcultural tourist symbol. Its influence is palpable in the streets of Kathmandu and Pokhara, where many stores cater to Chinese tourists by incorporating DFL into their branding or advertisements.

The modern lifestyle depicted in DFL inspires many Chinese tourists to embark on their own journeys, creating a multi-layered representation system that sometimes even involves duplicating the film's travel route for an 'authentic' DFL experience. The resulting travelogues, many of which directly reference DFL or the theme of wind, contribute to a collective narrative of travel in Nepal. These travelogues test, enhance, and enrich the meanings of happiness, purity, freedom, and romance that are often associated with the concept of wind.

Yet, in creating these narratives, many Chinese tourists become "prisoners of happy Nepal", confined by the specific representations of the country that they seek to validate and expand upon. Simultaneously, Nepal itself becomes a prisoner of these tourist expectations and representations. The digital format of these travelogues, coupled with the sharing capabilities of online platforms, further amplifies the circulation of these narratives.

Online user-generated travelogues, a relatively new phenomenon born out of global internet development and the rise of sharing culture, bear connections to both traditional printed travel

writing and modern Web 2.0 culture. Analysing them requires placing them in multiple discourses and understanding their intersections. The travelogues under discussion often blend formats, incorporating texts, pictures, and even videos, and serving dual functions as tourist guidebooks and personal travel diaries. They are a product of various historical trajectories intersecting in the contact zone. For instance, these travel writings could be viewed as a continuation of a millennia-old cultural tradition between these neighbouring countries, harking back to the travel records of ancient Chinese monks visiting the Buddhist Kingdom. Furthermore, these writings also relate to the Europe-centric narrative of print culture, which is tied to changes in travel, consumption, and lifestyles since the 18th century (Gassan, 2005; Goodwin and Johnston, 2013; Schaff, 2009).

Traditionally, travelogues and guidebooks have served two primary and interconnected roles. The first is functional, acting as the tourists' pathfinder (Lew, 1991), providing practical and actionable travel advice. The second, although subtler, holds more profound implications, acting as an ideological tool that aids in establishing popular comprehension of other cultures' meanings (Gilbert, 1999: 283). It does so by offering a framework for experiencing a place (Lew, 1991: 126) or imparting a robust sense of place (Carter, 1998: 350). Notably, neither offering seemingly objective information nor illustrating the tourist destination is a neutral or purely functional act. Instead, both activities shape travel writings into an arena where power intersects. A wealth of scholarly research highlights the intricate journey through which travelogues and guidebooks evolved, transmitting, altering, and integrating into various knowledge systems closely associated with European colonial explorers, adventurers, businesspeople, officials, and scholars' global travels and their attempts to document, comprehend, and systematise the globe from their perspectives, with a focus on oddity and exoticism (Bhattacharyya, 1997; Braham, 2002; Jacobs, 2000; Régi, 2013; Weisenfeld, 2000).

The travel writing genre converts a chaotic reality into a series of picturesque scenes (Braham, 2002: 385), accomplished by selecting sights and providing information about them (Bhattacharyya, 1997: 381). These texts do not merely demonstrate various material scenes without intention or agenda. Rather, they continually reshape a mental cultural model (Régi, 2013: 55), transforming the host destination into an object on display for the gaze of the privileged (western/European/Chinese) power (Weisenfeld, 2000). These historical powers, or residues thereof, are further complicated by tourists' varying uses of them. They establish limbo spaces for tourists between public and private, collective and individual, as well as self and

other. These spaces persist as travelling imaginations and experiences are continually mediated by multiple subjectivities and objectivities (Bender et al., 2013; Koivunen, 2010; Lew, 1991). Through repeated travelling practices, these spaces invade both the physical and mental worlds of host societies.

Until recently, the authorship of travel writing was limited to a relatively small number of privileged individuals capable of not only physically travelling but also publishing their works to the market. The advent of the Web 2.0 era, a time when "The Web will be understood not as screenfuls of text and graphics but as a transport mechanism, the ether through which interactivity happens" (DiNucci, 1999: 32), has dramatically reshaped both online and offline landscapes. The authorship of cultural production has been democratised (Young, 2019), or rather, distributed to every participant. This paradigm shift, hand in hand with the emergence of Bauman's confessional society (Bauman, 2007), has dissolved the boundary separating private from public, making it a public virtue and obligation to expose the private. In this society, while many previously spatially and socially isolated individuals are connected through similar information, they also feel compelled to live private lives in the public domain for fear of social exclusion (Beer and Burrows, 2010).

As such, traditionally mundane, routine, and unexciting everyday life has become a vibrant source of cultural production, forming a rather chaotic and complex virtual environment (Beer, 2008: 622), which is reflected even more chaotically and complexly in reality. Bypassing traditional, stringent, and time-consuming censorship systems, publication processes, and market promotion, virtually every modern participant of web cultures seems to possess the right and power to engage in cultural production. Their practices, like watching, clicking, reading, writing, posting, sharing, commenting, and remixing, challenge society's traditional rules of production and consumption. "Interactive platforms, collective intelligence, ambient awareness, and crowd-sourcing" (Gray, 2012: 67) have endowed traditionally passive consumers with new modern identities - as prosumers, the new objects of capitalist exploitation (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), or as the craft consumer, "the consumer … as a self-conscious manipulator of the symbolic meanings attached to products, … using them to create or maintain a given impression, identity, or lifestyle" (Campbell, 2005: 24).

Therefore, online user-generated travel writing embodies a blend of two modern identities: the cosmopolitan traveller and the participant in cultural production. To a considerable extent, these

identities and the practices they engender, such as the pursuit of a 'complete' modern identity through mobility and the fear of isolation, are underscored by one of the principles of modern life: participation and engagement. This principle is, in turn, driven by the mobility and predatory nature of capital.

As a modern practice, online travel writing not only transforms and mirrors people's travel consumption habits – as "the means and speed of motion affect the way people experience their travel as well as how they write about it" (Youngs, 2013: 178) – but also generates new objects of consumption (Mieli and Zillinger, 2020). Through producing and consuming these new cultural artefacts and engaging in associated practices – namely, being mobile online and/or offline – Chinese tourists strive to achieve their ideal versions of modern identities. They vie for various forms of capital, which are not necessarily quantified in monetary terms but rather in terms of reputation and influence (Blaer et al., 2020). In return, their transient status and presence on-site, as well as the reputation they garner, legitimise the authenticity of host societies in their writings (Cardell and Douglas, 2018; Salet, 2021). This, in turn, contributes to the tourists' pursuit of their desired achievements.

The oldest travelogue in my archive, posted online on 21st September 2012, chronicles the experiences of Yang, a Chinese budget traveller, over a 21-day journey through Nepal and India. Its content and narrative tone predominantly adhere to the style of Lonely Planet (LP), segregating information into distinct sections such as Entry, Telecommunication, Accommodation, and Sightseeing & Transportation (Super_Young, 2012). Each section provides relevant tips based on the author's personal experience. In addition to the information listed by Yang, the interactive dialogue between the author and readers throughout the post serves as a crucial avenue for information exchange, and it contributes to the credibility of the information provided.

I propose that the perceived credibility of the information about the tourist destination and travel experience relies on two interrelated factors: the duplicability of the information and the establishment of the author's authority. The majority of the comments on Yang's post aim to elucidate 'hard' information, such as visa application procedures, travel expenses, hotel recommendations, and language barriers. The focus of these queries indirectly reveals readers' imagined hurdles to travel and their general anxieties about journeying, which largely centre on three factors: government, capital, and personal ability. These concerns, embedded within

the comments, can be interpreted as individuals seeking strategies to circumvent governmental control (e.g., methods for applying or not applying for visas), economically optimal plans (e.g., recommendations on accommodations or meals), and personal capability alignments with destinations (e.g., acceptance of limited English proficiency). These three factors are not only dictated by societal structures that regulate not just travel, but nearly all aspects of people's everyday lives; they are also influenced by the diverse personal experiences of these structures since abilities and resources to overcome these obstacles are not uniformly distributed.

From the content of these comments, it can be inferred that many of Yang's respondents are young, prospective individual travellers who lack substantial monetary resources and international travel experience. As Yang himself indicates, they are economically constrained yet curious about the world. The perceived cost of travelling abroad, in terms of money, time, and energy, is subjectively evaluated by them. Furthermore, individuals' needs for and ability to process information vary. Traditional travel guidebooks and official tourist brochures may not prioritise the practical, cost-saving, and direct information these individuals seek, and the provided information might be too broad or raw for some. Essentially, these travellers are seeking processed, filtered, and tailor-made instructions that can offer them precise guidance. Thus, Yang's travel experiences and the tips he provides become tested and, importantly, duplicable information, enabling fellow travellers to minimise various costs.

Yang's long-term engagement with his readership, including his patience in answering repetitive questions, and the consistent effort to provide updates even five years post publication of his travelogue, not only fosters a sense of trust and rapport but also constructs his online persona (McWha et al., 2018) as a seasoned explorer. This persona is the cumulative result of Yang's proactive presentation, positive comments from readers, and their sustained interaction. The (fluid) establishment of Yang's authoritative persona further validates his narratives, and by extension, authenticates the image of Nepal in his travelogue.

Yang's work, in comparison to other travelogues in my archive replete with detailed and subjective observations of Nepal, appears rather mechanical and monotonous. This characteristic is evident right from the title, Budget travel in Nepal for 21 days cost 2569 yuan (including 300 for buying a cell phone, 280 for an Indian visa, 375 for a trekking permit) (Super_Young, 2012). Yang's focus on specific details formatted as an itinerary lends an

objective tone to the narrative instead of personal subjective feelings associated with the journey, a trait pervasive throughout the post. An excerpt from the Entry section reads:

> "There are not many things that should be noted about entering Nepal. If you come from Tibet, Zhangmu is the only port from which Nepal is accessible… From Lhasa to Zhangmu, one can have many transportation options, including regular buses, car-sharing, and hitchhiking; I chose the last option. There are hostels in Zhangmu. But the prices are relatively high. … Two things must be done in Zhangmu. The first one is registration and the other is cash exchange...I recommend that you have cash exchanged in Zhangmu because the rate will be significantly reduced in Nepal … If you prefer to take cars, it will cost you around ten yuan. By walking, it would take around twenty minutes… Sometimes the officer will ask you for extra money, you just ignore them…" (Super_Young, 2012; my translation)

In Yang's travel narrative, he essentially becomes a navigator across different locales rather than a tourist exploring them. His focus is constantly centred on avoiding potential dangers to his safety, expenditures, and overall travel experience. His attention is more skewed towards mitigating risks than experiencing the joy of discovering new places. An example of this is his account of visiting Patan Durbar in Kathmandu:

> "Patan is the second largest city in Kathmandu Valley, bordering Kathmandu city… (you) can see the Patan Gate where the ticket office is located,… If (you) just cross the gate and immediately turn right, (you) should avoid their eyes…I returned back, after a big circle, finding another entry behind a big supermarket located on the other side of the bus station. The only place worth visiting in Patan is the Durbar Square, … not very recommended." (Super_Young, 2012; my translation)

Yang's account of travel is centred around circumnavigating potential hazards, from unfair exchange rates offered by local agents to corrupt officials and unworthy tourist attractions. Despite its ostensibly impartial, objective tone, Yang's travel advice shapes his depiction of

Nepal, even if he rarely describes the tourist destinations directly. Several scholars agree that our understanding of tourist destinations, as they are embedded in various shifting discourses, are socio-spatial constructions (Becken et al., 2017; Bhattacharyya, 1997; Carter, 1998; Chaudhary, 2000; Hammett, 2014; Nelson, 2012). Advice related to travel and beyond from various sources can significantly influence people's subjective evaluations of their destinations. Implicit in Yang's travel advice and his communication with peers is an attempt to systematise and manage the chaotic host society brimming with visible and invisible dangers. Yang's advice on travelling in Nepal paints the country as a chaotic place lacking proper governance and planning. His travel narrative depicts a successful journey overcoming a series of risks and dangers with bravery and intelligence, rendering the risks 'safe'' and the place 'exciting' (Carter, 1998: 351).

Yang's travel advice often suggests staying inconspicuous and avoiding the local gaze as a strategy to mitigate potential risks while travelling in Nepal. This perspective is echoed by other Chinese tourists' experiences, especially those of solo female travellers for whom local Nepali men are perceived as a significant risk. Sasa (2013), a solo Chinese female traveller in Nepal, shares her experience:

> "She told me that Nepali men were very lecherous…However, my later experience proved that she did not exaggerate anything. Nepali men show their enthusiasm (for foreign women) regardless of place and time … And they can say nothing more than the cliches like 'where are you from?' 'China.' 'Oh, ni hao'. That is all they know." (Sasa, 2013; my translation)

As suggested by Sasa's narrative, her discomfort with local Nepali males is not solely due to feeling sexually insecure but also due to her perception of Nepali males as lacking ideal masculine traits—loyalty to partners and a charming personality. Sasa's narratives are reminiscent of research on sexual encounters in Nepal's transnational tourist areas (Adams, 1996; Liechty, 1996; Yamaga, 2007). These interactions often involve contrasting notions of modernity and primitivity.

However, both primitivity and modernity are not distributed equally among individuals, but rather, are hierarchically ordered. This complex structure is revealed further in Sasa's narratives.

She is not averse to pursuing romantic relationships in Nepal, provided her partner is a Western white man. During an episode in a bar, Sasa recounts an encounter with a "tall and strong" Western man (Sasa, 2013). She describes an immediate connection, symbolised by a shared gaze, and the air being filled with sweet flavours. As their evening progressed, she discovered the man was Australian, assisting local impoverished communities in Nepal and had a penchant for poetry. The narrative reaches a high point when Sasa narrates the unexpected kiss from the man.

However, this romantic episode did not endure. Sasa soon writes, using the second-person pronoun to engage her readers: "but you know… I am not only a woman but also a traveller. .... She will only circle above Thamel, overlooking this city, …" (Ibid)

These accounts from Sasa serve to illustrate her perception of a superior form of masculinity, embodied by the Australian man, as well as her self-positioning in relation to this form of modernity. Her narrative also implies a sense of helplessness, a stasis within her mobility. Thus, her statement that she will "circle around above Thamel" symbolises a liminal status in her pursuit of happiness, the simultaneous existence of mobility and immobility, and the juxtaposition of desires associated with Australia and Nepal.

Both directly and indirectly, the travel writings of Yang and Sasa suggest their pursuits of happiness in Nepal. By sharing their experiences, they contribute, consciously or otherwise, to constructing and reinforcing the image of Nepal as a locus of happiness. From my archived travelogues, the search for happiness is intimately tied to people's diverse desires and ambitions. These texts often begin with a tribute to Nepal's unique position on both physical and cultural maps, and its spiritual centrality. For many travellers and writers, journeying to Nepal represents a time to rejuvenate between life's different stages, such as after graduation or quitting a job. It serves as an interval to reassess and strengthen relationships, and, for some, to create and preserve special memories. One writer notes that "when I walk, I clearly feel every passing second of life, of which I am proud" (Bai, 2016). These personal quests and reflections encapsulate travellers' expectations from their Nepali sojourn.

Through these diverse narratives, the meaning of Nepal is continually reinvented and reframed in accordance with various seemingly personal desires and ambitions. Yet these apparently private emotions are interconnected and articulated within collective social, political, and

cultural environments. Teo's (2004) observation that Anglo-Indian romance novels written by the British during the colonial period focus on the British style of love rather than Indian romance is analogous to the fact that the emotional musings and reflections found in contemporary Chinese travel writings are less about Nepal and more about diverse reflections on life back in China. To satisfy such desires, they require a passive and silent Nepal, readily available for their exploitation. A common method employed to facilitate this is the naturalisation of the land.

Let us momentarily diverge from our previous discussion to introduce another travel narrative, posted on the platform on 4th April 2019, that recounts a journey undertaken in 2017. The writer of the account, Fannuan, is a mother who voyaged to Nepal accompanied by her young son.

> "…
> I can still remember that night's sky full of large, brilliant stars,
> And the Milky Way within my sight.
> The pure white Moon illuminated the lake,
> where it silently reflected.
> …
> The borderland was as picturesque as a worldly paradise,
> with a waterfall cascading in touching distance,
> and roads and mountains enveloped by dense fog -
> it felt as though we were moving in paradise." (Fannuan, 2019; in the
> format of the original text)

The excerpt above captures Fannuan's experience while traversing the Nepal-China border in a jeep, epitomising the manner in which contemporary Chinese travel narratives tend to naturalise and essentialise Nepal as a picturesque landscape. When recollecting their experiences of entering Nepal from China by vehicle, crossing the Himalayan mountains, most Chinese travellers emphasised the danger, hardship, excitement, and even life-threatening circumstances. In stark contrast to these adventurous accounts, Fannuan 'softens' her narratives with a poetic structure that encapsulates her sentiment towards her travels in Nepal. Her emotive and illustrative language is linked by a chain of poignant symbols: the night sky, bright stars, the Milky Way, the Moon, paradise, lake, waterfall, and dense fog. As the vehicle moves,

different scenes present themselves, silent and static, offering ample space for Fannuan and her fellow tourists' activities. Moreover, any other human traces and activities are omitted from the narrative. In Fannuan's account, as well as many other Chinese travelogues, local people rarely speak, and even when they do, their words are articulated through the travellers' voices.

If the asymmetric power dynamics regulating tourist encounters are expressed more overtly in the travelogues discussed earlier through the language of direct judgement, their explicit presence is largely absent in accounts like Fannuan's, where such asymmetry is subtly encoded in the motifs that shape the landscapes. These landscapes blend seemingly factual descriptions with the travellers' subjective perspectives and psychological states, with the latter deftly concealed behind the objective portrayals of the foreign environments. The interplay of objectivity and subjectivity in the representation of landscapes is extensively addressed by scholars from human geography and art history. For example, Don Mitchell (1996) posits that landscape is artificially constructed through social struggles, yet dominant social actors seek to totalise it. Therefore, he asserts that landscapes are "best understood as a kind of produced, lived, and represented space constructed out of the struggles, compromises, and temporarily settled relations of competing and cooperating social actors" (Mitchell, 1996: 30). Similarly, Denis Cosgrove (1989: 121) views landscapes as a "way of seeing… as a rationally-ordered, designed, and harmonious creation whose structure and mechanism are accessible to the human mind as well as to the eye, and act as guides to humans in their alteration and improvement of the environment". Cosgrove further contends that landscapes are symbolic entities through which cultural norms are reproduced, and the values of dominant societal groups can be established (Ibid: 125). Thus, landscape operates as "a medium through which individuals represent themselves, their relationships, and their world, while employing many elements of the phenomenological model" (Dillman, 2015: 9).

If landscapes in natural environments are human constructs, then their depictions in any art form - be it painting, photography, literature, or travel writing - are layered constructs laden with coded messages. W.J.T Mitchell (2002: 14) offers a compelling perspective on this dual-representation aspect, describing landscape painting as a

> "representation of something that is already a representation in its own
> right… in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether
> they are placed there by the physical transformation of a place through

landscape gardening and architecture, or discovered in a place formed 'by nature'."

Mitchell (2002) also highlights the tension within landscape painting between faithful representation and aesthetic styles. The incorporation of European aesthetic styles and painting techniques is not merely about reproducing non-European scenes in a different artistic language. Rather, it is the use of these foreign artistic languages that transforms 'exotic' landscapes into rational structures that are more accessible to European audiences, while preserving their exotic allure. For instance, British painters in colonial India used English aesthetic styles to tame 'unusual' Indian landscapes, seeking to portray the exotic nature of the colony without making it appear alien (Tillotson, 2000). This balancing act, which produces a rational, yet exotic, picturesque landscape painting, satiates the viewer's curiosity while maintaining a safe distance from the object of their gaze (Mitchell, 2002: 16). For some scholars (e.g. Braham, 2002), this safe distance ensures a secure interpretation of the objects, often leading to the audience's voyeuristic pleasure.

It can be inferred from the aforementioned discussions that beneath the seemingly natural and eternal scenes, various forms of power underpin, reinvent, and perpetuate the practice of landscaping. Thus, the landscaping of Nepal in contemporary Chinese travel writing represents an exertion of power, one that seeks to shape and sustain a distinctively Chinese perspective of Nepal. This not only brings snippets of information about the land into the Chinese production line of tourist knowledge, but also forms a part of the growing Chinese presence in Nepal, largely due to the influx of Chinese tourists and the asymmetrical economic-political relationship between the two countries. To further complicate this issue, one can trace the roots of this asymmetry back to the colonial era, noting that little has changed (or been decolonised) since China (and India) joined the club of gentlemen, explorers, and peace-seekers. Despite the variations in the representation of Nepal through different powers, contemporary Chinese travel writing about Nepal aptly exhibits the colonial matrix of power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). This concept refers to the ambition to secure and assert one's privileged position within a hierarchical system by projecting one's self-image and perspectives onto a relatively vulnerable place, culture, or people.

Travel writing, in both its creation and interpretation, offers a threefold journey: to the tourist destination, into the mind of the traveller/writer, and ultimately, into the reader's own psyche

(Blanton, 2002). These journeys are interconnected through a perpetual cycle of individualised writing and reading practices. By reading travelogues, one not only gains seemingly factual information about the destination, but also learns about the writer's experiences, personality, life stories, as well as a myriad of relevant thoughts and reflections. While all travelogues share these functions to varying degrees, those that focus more on landscaping the tourist destination likely maximise these trips' potential. After all, landscapes devoid of human presence offer both writers and readers the greatest flexibility to explore and experience without compromise.

Another travelogue published online in 2016 evocatively illustrates a desolate, snow-laden landscape in the Himalayas, and a Chinese male climber's introspection within this environment.

> "When I think of EBC, what I am most struck by is the silence. In a place far removed from the chaos of mundane life, every sound becomes clear and distinguishable … With no external sounds to interfere, the world seemed to pulse to the rhythm of my breath." (Bai, 2016)

Another travelogue, documenting Chinese hiking activities, depicts the mountains as a realm above the clouds, saying, "everything chronicled in this article seems to originate from another world" (Xiaoxiaopengzi, 2016). The notion of "another world" succinctly conveys a sense of exoticism. In the landscaped Himalayan mountains, the exotic views are not necessarily perceived visually, as the Chinese travellers' gaze can often be obscured by the overwhelming whiteness and emptiness. However, this limitation does not deter these travellers from observing, reflecting, and projecting their own selves onto the landscape. Instead, it suggests that sight is just one aspect of perception and the ability to perceive (or hear, feel) does not solely rely on ocular organs. This ability is embodied, with the travellers' ears, noses, skin, and even brains serving as conduits through which they engage with the environment. This engagement then transforms the travellers' bodies and presence into vessels through which they absorb and interpret the world around them.

As I have previously emphasised, the process of landscaping by tourists is by no means a natural or neutral act; it is influenced and sustained by various forms of power. The "another world" mentioned in the quote above could be seen as a less artistic contemporary

interpretation of James Hilton's Blue Valley, yet it bears a similar Orientalist gaze. This interpretation is also largely informed by the 'scientific' knowledge established through Western anthropological research in the region since the mid-20th century, often highlighting its counter-modern aspects. Simultaneously, there are concerted efforts by private, local, state, and international entities to transform the mountains into an international tourist attraction, profoundly altering the lived experience of the area. However, the imprints left by these historical and contemporary activities are often concealed in Chinese travelogues from my collection by the thick snowfall on the mountain. By focusing their senses on the snow and letting their minds wander freely, associating the snow with purity, the origin of the world, paradise, and void, these travellers consciously or unconsciously turn a blind eye to the prominent artificial imprints left on the land. These include the Sherpas' climbing history (Adams, 1996; Ortner, 1999), the Nepali state's promotion of national parks in the Himalayas (Brower, 1991; Liechty, 2017; Sivinski, 2015), and China's and Nepal's modern infrastructure projects in the mountains (Murton, 2017, 2016; Murton et al., 2016; Murton and Lord, 2020). These artificial traces are not imperceptible to Chinese travellers. Instead, their significance is re-interpreted, becoming an integral part of the naturalised landscapes. For instance, in Bai's travelogue, he includes several photographs taken during his trek along EBC trails. Many of these images resemble pure depictions of nature, highlighting the mountain peaks while human activity and traces are either excluded or minimized. Other pictures, while capturing artificial traces like humans, buildings, lights, roads, and planted trees, tend to marginalise them against the backdrop of natural elements, as exemplified by the following picture.

Figure 11 A landscaping picture of Tengboche (Bai, 2016)

The village captured in Bai's photograph, as described by him, is Tengboche. Originally developed around a monastery, this village is internationally renowned as a stop on the most accessible route to Mt. Everest (Sassoon, 1988). In Bai's photo, the village is barely discernible, not only due to the composition of the image which emphasises the mountain peak and starlit sky over the faint line of buildings, but also because of the use of colour editing to spotlight the peak bathed in moonlight and starlight. The visual language used to encode Bai's photo is not unique to leisure-based representations. In fact, it mirrors earlier works framed within the language of scientific research (e.g. Byers, 1997; Sassoon, 1988) which similarly position the small village within the larger, imposing natural landscape. This consistent portrayal across different languages and perspectives reveals the uniform power of modern global flows, suggesting that the similarities in depiction are not coincidental but rather an indication of how modernity, through its many currents, attempts to impose a fixed interpretation on the landscape and lend it meaning.

A key aspect of this meaning-making process involves associating a place with specific representations. While this process requires considerable time, effort, and resources, once complete, the bond between the place and its representation becomes so intertwined that the latter dominates the former's meaning, making the place unimaginable without its constructed

representation. Furthermore, considering the colonial roots of the power that shaped and propagated Nepal's image, which I have highlighted in previous sections of this thesis, the contemporary Chinese trekkers inheriting these western-imposed images raises questions about the degree to which trans-local interactions can be decolonised from western influences, or whether a 'pure' direct interaction is even feasible.

These queries will be revisited and discussed further in later parts of this thesis. For now, however, I direct attention away from the mountainous landscapes and instead to the bustling urban streetscapes of Kathmandu, examining how these travelogues transform elements of unplanned and unregulated development, such as dusty roads, chaotic traffic, and tangled electrical wires, into landscaped symbols.

In reviewing the travelogues from my collection, I have observed two prevalent tendencies regarding depictions of urban streetscapes in Nepal. First, none of the accounts try to skirt around the chaos of the city. This element of disorder, to an extent, imparts an adventurous aspect to their narratives. Recounting experiences of Kathmandu's polluted environment, the rough, dust-filled roads, the incessant blare of horns, and haphazard clusters of buildings have become recurrent themes. Travellers also often detail their "suffering" from unusual experiences. However, not all complaints serve as criticisms of the host society. Some, as mentioned earlier, provide the backdrop for adventure stories, while others reflect the second narrative tendency I have noted: the romanticisation of non-touristic aspects. The two pictures below exemplify how these aspects are visualised.

Figure 12 A tourist picture of Kathmandu's streetscape (1) (Kaishu JK, 2019)

Figure 13 A tourist picture of Kathmandu's streetscape (2) (JK, 2019) (Kaishu JK, 2019)

The individual constituents of the two images under discussion, including the tangled overhead electrical wires, faded commercial branding, dispersed litter, and aged trucks, may not singularly ignite the interest of the tourist. Yet, these motifs, when amalgamated within one frame, fabricate a narrative suffused with exoticism and nostalgia. While these depictions may encapsulate only a transient moment (e.g., an approaching convoy of trucks) from a unique vantage point, these ostensibly accidental timings and particular angles are strategically organised and socially systematised by the tourism gaze (Urry and Larsen, 2011) to delineate a broader thematic representation.

The gaze and the inherent subjectivity of those gazing often elude scrutiny in image analysis due to the projection of the gaze from an external perspective, thereby rendering it invisible to the viewer. Concurrently, the creators of these images, concealed within unseen locations, project their socially and culturally constructed subjectivity onto specific subjects through their gaze. This operation is characteristically subtle, leaving few discernible traces as the objectivity rendered in the images frequently obscures the power and creative authority of the gaze. Consequently, when the viewer's focus is commandeered by the explicit elements within the images, they seldom challenge their authenticity.

The position from which the gaze is cast bears significance, as it influences the interpretation and presentation of the constructed view. Notwithstanding minor disparities, the gaze formulating the images under discussion can be classified as emanating from a horizontal distance, consequently instilling a sense of presence in the viewer. Upon interpreting these images, viewers might envision the creators at ground level, confronting the subjects from a proximate yet secure distance. This crafted presence accentuates the mundane urban landscapes, placing an emphasis on artificial details and offering negligible scope for the portrayal of natural elements. In numerous instances, such images are complemented by textual narratives describing the quotidian lives of local people from a touristic viewpoint.

In these narratives, locals frequently appear as monolithic, anonymous entities, identified merely as Nepali men, women, children, and elders. At the utmost, they are acknowledged by their professional roles—guides, drivers, vendors, and fraudsters. By depriving local individuals of their personal identities, authors can manipulate their characters with greater ease within the narratives of their travelogues. One Chinese traveller candidly admits, "Every

person and object associated with Nepal that I encounter during my travels serves as material for my pictorial representations, which I find captivating" (Kangkangdelvxingpingdao, 2018).

Furthermore, the travelogues within my archive generally do not place substantial emphasis on delineating direct interactions with the host population. A representative account reads as follows:

> "Human voices, harmonised with the rhythmic sounds of cymbals and gongs, emanated from a distant location. Post dinner, we returned to Taumadhi Square, drawn by the mellifluous singing. In the square, individuals congregated in a circle, reciting poems before a Hindu temple. Glancing over my shoulder, I observed the moon hanging low over the rooftops" (Frank, 2017).

This account is a typical depiction of an exotic, ritualistic activity unfolding in a temple's foreground—an event that does not materialise before the travellers spontaneously, but is actively sought out. However, instead of expressing overwhelming exhilaration or an irresistible desire to participate, the Chinese traveller exhibits unexpected restraint, maintaining a judicious distance to observe the spectacle. This choice to observe rather than participate suggests an invisible barrier that relegates the tourists to a separate plane.

In accounts of a similar vein, Chinese travellers and Nepali locals occupy separate, non-interactive domains, influencing one another not through direct and vibrant engagement, but through indirect forms of observation. This behaviour situates Nepali subjects within a drama performed by local actors on a local stage, but directed and observed by Chinese tourists. This division complicates the concept of "Staged Authenticity" (MacCannell, 2013, 1973), displacing the backstage, the covert area where preparations for the stage are conducted.

In other words, if a backstage exists, it is no longer the exclusive domain of the local actors. When Frank, the Chinese traveller, introduces the moon into his narrative, he also infuses his cultural grammar, be it personal or collective, to complete the narrative. As I have underscored, the narrative's completion rarely transpires through direct dynamics or encounters with asymmetrical forces. Instead, the imbalanced power exchange, symbolised by the (im)mobilities of people, goods, money, and capital, is protected by gaps within the travel

narratives. The distanced, horizontal gaze and the boundaries established not only ensure a sense of secure excitement and simulated experiences for the travellers but also subtly mask their abrupt presence on the ground and the power that legitimises their tourist presence.

In addition to the horizontal gaze, Chinese tourists often favour an alternative vantage point, adopting a vertical orientation, that is, an upward-downward perspective. The vertical gaze diverges significantly from the horizontal gaze, wherein travellers construct a semblance of presence while concurrently confining their ambitions and desires. In contrast, the vertical gaze explicitly discloses the tourists' aspiration to exert dominance over the viewed subjects and to evade potential threats from the mundane world. In order to secure this vertical perspective, many Chinese tourists elect to ascend hills, thus establishing a considerable distance between the viewer and the viewed subject.

My archive of travel writings indicates that within the Kathmandu Valley, many Chinese tourists express a particular interest in visiting the Swayambhu Stupa to obtain an advantageous view of the city. This preference can be attributed to two distinct factors. The first, a more practical and superficial reason, pertains to the geographical location of the Swayambhu Stupa atop a hill, offering an ideal platform for panoramic city views. The second, more ideologically and metaphorically nuanced, relates to the empowering effect of ascent, both physically and psychologically. Ascending the hilltop of Swayambhu, in particular, appears to channel this sense of empowerment to those in pursuit of it.

At the pinnacle of this hill resides perhaps one of the most iconic sets of eyes in the world - the half-closed eyes of the Swayambhu Stupa. An official tourist brochure published by the Nepal Tourism Board articulates this as follows:

> "As one enters the valley, the first sight to catch the visitor's eye is the hemispherical white dome (stupa) of the Swayambhu Maha Chaitya perched majestically atop a hill on the western fringe of the Kathmandu Valley…The Swayambhu Maha Chaitya with the semi-closed eyes of the Buddha overlooking the valley from all four directions…" (Nepal Tourism Board, 2012: 24)

Many Chinese tourists are drawn to these omnipresent eyes, appropriating them as their own powerful gaze, surveying the cityscape of Kathmandu. Whereas Buddha's eyes exude compassion and a cosmic perspective, the eyes constructing the images below are marked by curiosity and a voracious appetite for consumption.
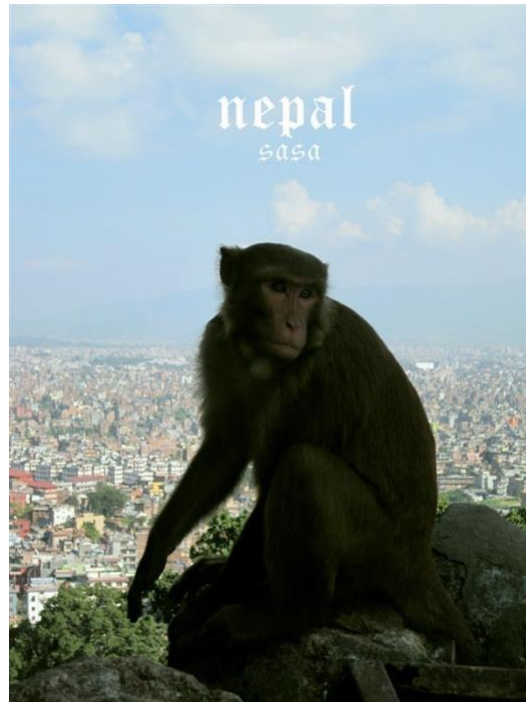
Figure 14 A panoramic city view of Kathmandu (1) (Sasa, 2012)

Figure 15 A panoramic city view of Kathmandu (2) (Frank, 2017)

Figure 16 A panoramic city view of Kathmandu (3) (Sisi, 2017)

These photographs are captured from the crest of Swayambhu. While they may not originate from the exact same location, their similar visualisations of Kathmandu's cityscape embody a privileged gaze—one in which the quotidian life at ground level is overshadowed by a monkey on the hill. Kathmandu's rich depth and complexity are deconstructed into countless rudimentary units by these touristic 'deities,' who, from their lofty vantage point, reassemble these units in alignment with their envisioned ideal landscape. This audacious perspective, paired with an indifferent attitude, invites resentment from numerous local Nepalis. As highlighted by Michael Hutt (1996: 59), this is keenly felt, for example, by Nepali writers in their acute consciousness of the invasive tourist gaze, wishing instead to direct it toward "less attractive features of everyday life of which visitors should be aware."

In a strict sense, it is the tourists' act of ascending that bestows upon them a certain sanctity, as described by de Certeau (1984: 93-94). When a tourist "ascends," they leave behind the collective which blurs and amalgamates all distinguishing characteristics of authors or spectators. This "elevation transfigures" them into a voyeur, crafting a representation, a simulacrum—a textual tableau frozen in time and thus ripe for interpretation, "to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god." In this context, the solar Eye, human eyes, and the Buddha's eyes converge in the same space. By observing from the same vantage point as the Buddha's eyes, the tourists' "ecstasy of reading" (ibid: 93) is maximally gratified, allowing them to indulge in a sacred illusion, wherein they survey the city as the Buddha might.

Yet, "illusion," as it is used here, does not imply that such power exists solely within the realm of imagination. On the contrary, practices such as physical movement, travel writing, and photography all contribute to altering spatial configurations, and knowledge can be accrued through these processes. For instance, photography in the Himalayan area, as examined by scholars like Clare Harris (2017), has consistently served as a tool for knowledge production. In this regard, contemporary Chinese tourist photography from Swayambhu's hilltop fabricates a tapestry of complexity. It intertwines the influences of colonialism, modernity, religion, technology, and capital, thereby shaping the knowledge production of the city. Furthermore, this production process is dynamic, and the participation of contemporary Chinese actors is but a current within the broader, transcultural flows.

The summit of Swayambhu serves as an apt illustration of this point. For instance, the widespread adoption of Swayambhu's alias—the Monkey Temple—among Chinese tourists, suggests their entanglement with Western-shaped Nepali tourism. Indeed, it was Western tourists who initially expressed fascination with the monkeys inhabiting the hill and consequently popularised the moniker. Moreover, the act of ascending to the stupa-crested hilltop is not a novelty for contemporary Chinese tourists. Over a century ago, this location was validated by Westerners as an authentic site for experiencing the Oriental essence of the Valley. Percy Brown, a British art historian from the colonial era, published *Picturesque Nepal*, with the aim of preserving the rapidly deteriorating art of Nepali craftsmen. This art, representative of many attractive Oriental qualities, was undergoing a significant transition (Brown, 1912: vi). Brown, upon gaining privileged access to the summit of Swayambhu, lavished praise on its "Oriental feeling" and "romantic position" (ibid: 143-144). His narrative continues, "With the Valley interlaced by its rivers, and the city of Kathmandu shimmering below, it presents a picture full of interest and beauty" (ibid: 144). While the panorama captured by Brown's gaze somewhat differs from those depicted in the aforementioned photographs, their shared motivation—capturing the entirety of the Valley—resoundingly echoes. This enduring intent, persisting for approximately a century, invites contemplation on how asymmetrical power relations have evolved.

The evidence presented above does not suggest that contemporary Chinese tourists are merely replicating the experiences of their Western counterparts from decades past. Although they, as an emerging global power, also favour viewing the Valley from Swayambhu, this does not imply they are passively succumbing to a homogenising colonial process in which their

mindsets are fully assimilated. Cultural, historical, and political nuances imbue the ostensibly similar touristic practices and locales. In the context of Swayambhu, the influx of Chinese tourists has led to the rediscovery and remixing of knowledge. One notable addition to the cultural symbolism of the site from the Chinese perspective, as compared to its Western-oriented Oriental gaze, is its symbolisation of the historical friendship between China and Nepal.

Buddhist narratives about the origins of the Kathmandu Valley (Bajracharya and Michaels, 2016) accord prominence to the site where the chaitya is currently situated, once a lake, as the Valley's genesis point. According to legend, it was Bodhisattva Manjushree, originating from China, who rendered the valley habitable by using his magic sword to slice through the surrounding hills and drain the water.

> "In the same Tretayuga, Bodhisattva Manjusri came from Mahacina. He stayed ... for three nights and paid *darsana* to Svayambhu-in-the-Form-of-Light" ... He stayed in the middle, cut through the mountain, and drained the water out of the lake... Just as several serpents and aquatic animals had left them together with the water, (Manjusri) persuaded Karkotaka, the serpent-king, (to stay) ... He built a large city named Manjupattana... He appointed Dharmakara as the king and returned to Mahacina through the northern path." (Bajracharya & Michaels, 2016: 1-2)

While the precise correlation between the domain of Mahacina, as described in classical texts, and contemporary China remains a topic for debate, this narrative has been extensively leveraged by various stakeholders since the mid-20th century, including those in the tourism sector. Buddhist historiography has been, to a large extent, transformed into a form of cultural capital employed to establish a unique connection with Chinese tourists—a strategy potentially designed to enhance its market appeal.

The cultural significance of the Swayambhu chaitya manifests as an illuminating exemplar of intricate transcultural power dynamics.

"The circular basement of the stupa signifies the Earth; the second layer in the square signifies air; the third triangular layer signifies water; the fourth layer, which resembles an umbrella, signifies fire; and the fifth layer, in a spiral shape, signifies life... A considerable gem is embedded at the apex of the stupa's umbrella-like top, signifying nirvana." (Baike, n.d.; Sasa, 2013; Sisi, 2017)

The above citation, recurrent in multiple travelogues from my archive, is employed by travellers as an explicatory tool to convey the religious and symbolic import represented by the chaitya. The origin of these sentiments piqued my interest, leading me to uncover that this cultural reference is derived from Baike, a Chinese open-source online information-sharing platform that permits unrestrained user edits without necessitating verifiable references. Although my inquiry could have ceased at this juncture, given the dearth of additional leads, an unexpected subsequent discovery unfolded a vastly more complex transcultural trajectory these words have navigated.

Hansheng Chen (1961), a distinguished modern Chinese scholar who contributed to a state endeavour aimed at articulating a shared historical narrative between Nepal and China as a decolonising technique, utilises strikingly similar phrasing. In his article, while striving to systematise the historical architectural exchange between the two nations, Chen enlists similar language to elucidate the symbolism of the Buddhist stupa. Despite the absence of direct evidence correlating the Baike and travelogue references to Chen's article, their concurrent existence during different epochs of Nepal's and China's relationship — influenced by disparate forces — partially unveils how a singular text can serve diversified functions when transposed across varying contexts.

While the concise depiction in the travelogues seeks to infuse the tourist site with an aura of enigma, a similar account in Chen's article is freighted with a more 'scientific' and political mission. This attempts to amalgamate China, Nepal, and Tibet into a shared cultural communication schema. However, this segment of Chen's work is predicated on the erroneous assumption that the Nepali chaitya and the Tibetan chorten, two distinct types of Buddhist stupas, are synonymous. Moreover, Chen's work, in its quest to decolonise the Western canon's articulation of the relationship between the two countries, ironically depends on colonial resources to fulfil its objective.

Chen's paper references the works of two Orientalists in this context. One is the aforementioned *Picturesque Nepal*. Chen appropriates Brown's theory, positioning Nepal between two superior civilisations, to substantiate his argument that Chinese national culture has indelibly marked Nepali national culture. The other scholar Chen invokes is the (in)famous European Lama Anagarika Govinda. Lama Govinda epitomises a complex figure, a product of Europe's colonial expansion and its Orientalist imaginings of the Himalayan region. Known for his European origin, his insider identity largely legitimised him as a credible Tibetologist for a comprehensive European audience. Despite his scant knowledge of local languages, he penned numerous books and academic articles on Tibetan Buddhist culture and later expanded his scholarly exploration into broader Oriental studies, investigating aspects of Chinese culture such as I Ching. Most of his work on Tibetan Buddhist culture, however, drew on secondary Western sources rather than primary Tibetan texts (see Lopez, 2018 for a more critical introduction of Lama Govinda).

The reference in Chen's work is from Lama Govinda's book, *Grundlagen Tibetischer Mystik-Nach den esoterischen Lehren des Grossen Mantra OM Mani Padme Hum* (1957) (Eng. *Foundation of Tibetan Mysticism according to the Esoteric Teachings of the Great Mantra OM Mani Padme Hum*, 1972). Notwithstanding the book title intimating Tibetan Buddhist teachings, it includes a segment that discusses elements of the Buddhist chakra system, in which Govinda theorises the chorten as the three-dimensional arrangement of these elements, as extrapolated from the biography of the esteemed Tibetan Buddhist Guru Milarepa (Govinda, 1957: 205).

While it falls outside my domain of expertise to evaluate the correctness of Govinda's assertion, it is not challenging to discern Chen's imprudence in utilising Govinda's concept for the analysis of the chaitya's structural religious symbolism. Chen's excessive focus on forging a trans-regional commonality overshadowed the recognition and comprehension of regional histories and the particularities of their respective cultures (For an extensive discourse on the history and symbolism of Nepali chaitya, and specifically the Swayambhu maha chaitya, refer to Bajracharya, 2021; Deva, 1974; Greene, 2002; Gutschow and Gellner, 1997; Riccardi, 1973; Seegers, 2017; Shrestha, 2018)

Concurrently, this highlights the constraining factors impeding not only early Asian scholars but also their contemporary counterparts striving to construct local knowledge rooted in direct South-South cooperation and to extricate themselves from Northern intervention. The question remains, can fruitful results be expected if the entire tree is tainted and opportunities to flourish on an alternative tree are scarce?

Regardless, this succinct passage persists and has intriguingly evolved into a footnote attributed to the maha chaitya by the burgeoning contemporary Chinese tourist presence. It serves as a lens through which this location is observed from a Chinese perspective, a perspective moulded by the negotiation between local subtleties and Western-centric global forces.

Conclusion

This chapter has thus far underscored the danger of the singularity of storytelling that permeates numerous contemporary cultural products within the tourist field in the Nepal-China contact zone. Such singularity is exemplified not only through a single-story plot, imagination, language, and symbol set, but also, more importantly, confirmed, sustained, legitimised, and circulated by a consistent power structure. This structure endorses a single, hegemonic order of perception and imagination deeply rooted in coloniality. The danger herein lies in the echo of the question proposed in Chapter One: what transpires when one people from a previously colonised group attempt direct interaction with another similarly colonised group, but encounter colonial mediation? The analysis of various cultural products such as films, tourist guidebooks, and online travelogues reveals the overwhelming power of Western, colonial knowledge in not only shaping mindsets but also the behaviours of direct contact between contemporary Asian countries. This is evidenced by the marginalisation, or even elimination, of local ways of seeing and understanding from the knowledge-making process and system.

However, the investigation of films and travelogues circulated in the contact zone illuminates the multimodality of knowledge resulting from direct trans-Himalayan interaction, and its complicated role in conditioning such contact. Travelogues, traditionally considered leisure consumption products rather than a valid mode of knowledge, reflect a hierarchical structure wherein different knowledge systems occupy asymmetrical positions. For instance, the 'descending' knowledge trajectory from a controversial European Lama to the state-sponsored

scholar to ordinary tourists is perceived as a downgrading process, transforming official knowledge into consumption resources.

Nevertheless, the analysis in this chapter suggests that individual, ordinary tourists are not wholly vulnerable or passive to these untouchable and well-protected 'high' forms of knowledge. Their relation to the powers that sustain the hierarchy varies. As demonstrated above, tourists tactically position themselves within the tourist field of the contact zone, employing techniques like copying, modifying, landscaping, reshaping, and selecting, to generate distinct forms of tourist knowledge aligned with their interests and agendas. They do not simply reinforce a single, universal perception of Nepali tourism from the Chinese perspective; instead, their works, situated in various contexts and power scales, create numerous heterogeneous versions of the land through their tourist performance.

Moreover, the multimedia formats of travelogues, which go beyond hegemonic textual languages, and their alternative circulation trajectories in cyberspace, facilitating direct communication and co-creation, further complicate traditionally safeguarded formats and routes of knowledge-making. Therefore, this chapter concludes that by sharing and circulating their leisure experiences in Nepal as a form of direct trans-Himalayan contact, contemporary Chinese tourists, whether consciously or not, contribute to the reshaping or creation of new multimodal knowledge amid numerous trends. Such multimodal knowledge, while maintaining complex relations with the traditional knowledge of Nepali Studies, also confounds the boundaries and connotations of the academic body.

The ensuing chapter shifts its focus to another mode of knowledge - Vlogging, examining its routes and agents. Unlike travelogues that often romanticise Nepal as a Shangri-la in the secular world, Vlogs about Nepal tend to portray the country as a tail in the linear narrative of development and modernity. Rather than focusing on roots, the subsequent chapter aims to explore the routes of this sharp contradiction. This inquiry aims to investigate another alternative, yet far from alien, mode of knowledge that complicates both the old and new bodies of Nepali Studies.

Chapter Five Vlogging Nepal, the Darker and More Authentic Aspects of Shangri-la?

In the previous chapter, a comprehensive examination was undertaken of Nepal's portrayal in the contemporary corpus of online Chinese travelogues. Central to these depictions is the Orientalist construct of Shangri-la, which often provides the thematic bedrock for the representation of this Himalayan nation, influencing significantly the tourist practices of contemporary Chinese visitors. This chapter, however, directs attention towards an alternative media form - online Vlogging - within which the portrayal of Nepal conspicuously contrasts with the paradisiacal Shangri-la construct. This juxtaposition presents Nepal as one of the world's most economically challenged nations, characterised by societal disorder and associated with concepts such as the Selling-Kidney Village (Ch. *Mai shen cun*), Killing Disneyland (Ch. *Duo ming di shi ni*), and India's diminutive sibling, among others. These notions provide the underpinning for the thematic and visual constructs within these succinct online videos, bearing scant resemblance to the Shangri-la-like idyll portrayed by another cohort of Chinese nationals during a temporally parallel timeframe.

Thus, the primary question this chapter endeavours to address is the origin of this profound disparity in the representation of Nepal across varied media types within the contemporary Chinese context. On the strength of this analysis, further queries are examined such as the manner in which the 'poorest country' label is crafted via China's contemporary Vlogging practices, the identity of these Chinese Vloggers in Nepal, their impetus for visiting the Himalayan nation, and their motivation to engage in Vlogging.

By interrogating these issues, this chapter posits that the trans-media thematic and visual divergences in representing Nepal do not imply the existence of two fundamentally disparate trajectories within the contact zone that influence Nepal's representation. A meticulous comparative examination of the themes, images, and actors involved reveals that the juxtaposition between the Shangri-la construct and the poorest-country narrative can be viewed as disparate reflections observed when the same transnational discourse traverses a common prism. To express it differently, both narratives are moulded and sustained by the asymmetrical power dynamics between Nepal and China, fundamentally premised on notions of development and modernity.

However, in this chapter, we transition from the usual subjects, the Chinese tourists, to a different group of actors - the vloggers. As subsequent sections will elucidate, the term Vlogger

does not denote an emerging, definable profession. Instead, it encompasses a broad demographic navigating the promises and paradoxes of modernity and development, whose strategic response to enhance agency in their lives comprises constant travel and the public broadcasting of their quotidian experiences.

The narrative arc of this chapter commences with a short video forwarded to me by a colleague I encountered during my initial fieldwork in Nepal. In this video, a Chinese man introduces an alleged 'Nepali' custom where women greet their husbands each morning. Set in a modest room, the man, accompanied by a Nepali girl, attempts to explain the ritual to the audience. The girl, unfamiliar with Chinese, echoes some words but mostly communicates non-verbally. The video showcases her touching the man's feet with her forehead, performing a gesture of respect, and then engaging in a "Watering ritual" where she washes the man's feet and uses the water on herself. The man concludes by promising more insights into so-called local customs in future videos.

Figure 17 A Vlog clip from Xiaodao's social media account, accessed on 12 August 2020 (Xiaodao, 2020)

One day, one of my Chinese informants, Xiao P, shared this Vlog with me, expressing her strong disapproval of its content. Xiao P, who had taught Chinese at Nepal's Confucius Institute, found the video's portrayal of Nepal distasteful and misleading. She criticised the Chinese man in the video for parading the young Nepali woman as a 'trophy' and described him as an uneducated individual who sought acceptance in Nepal due to rejection in China. Xiao P speculated that the Nepali girl was likely with him for financial reasons and was unaware of

the video's implications. She also expressed concern about the increasing number of what she termed "low-tier" Chinese visitors in Nepal, believing they negatively impacted the local environment, evident in the growing commercial Chinese presence.

Xiao P's apprehensions regarding the miscreant elements within the Chinese population in Nepal, as well as the ensuing social damage inflicted by the growing influx of unregulated Chinese visitors, bear considerable resonance. In recent years, activities such as unauthorised goods smuggling, human trafficking in the form of bride-buying between Nepal and China, cybercrimes and bank fraud executed by Chinese nationals, along with street fights, have garnered substantial attention from the Nepali local media and populace (e.g. Anil and Dhungana, 2018; Khabarhub, 2022; Ojha, 2023a, 2023b; Post Report, 2022). These grievances are not merely expressed by the host society but are also echoed by numerous Chinese residents based in Nepal, particularly those who have been residing and working in the country for a longer duration. Many of my informants expressed feelings of being threatened, as they contended that the illicit activities carried out by their recently arrived compatriots, who disregard local laws and social harmony, would impede their business operations and overall lifestyle in Nepal.

> "I typically refrain from interacting with these newcomers. If they visit my restaurant, they are my customers, and I will accord them the due treatment. But I do not have personal relations with them. Presently, their number has grown too large, and their collective constitution is too complex for me to understand." (Personal interview, 2019)

Hua Chen (a pseudonym), a middle-aged Chinese restaurant proprietor in Kathmandu, conveyed this sentiment to me. He has been residing in Nepal for over twenty years. As Chen elucidated, he deliberately maintains his distance from those he perceives as potentially destabilising elements in his life. However, during our many interactions, he never distinctly defined who these newcomers were.

Another informant offered a clue to identify these newcomers. Dingzhen (a pseudonym), a former university classmate who had been employed in the Kathmandu-based branch of a Chinese airline company for about three years when I reconnected with him in Kathmandu, described the place as a "shit hole" (Ch. *Gou pi di fang*). Dingzhen's derisive classification was

not merely a result of the "dismal environment," but also the monotony of life there, partly attributed to the dearth of trustworthy individuals.

> "My routine comprises office work during the day. When I'm off duty, I sometimes hit the gym and play PS4 in my room. I barely socialise here … Occasionally, I interact with people in Thamel but refrain from befriending them. All of them are daigouers and their primary interest in dining with me stems from their desire to secure free package allowances for flights back to China." (Personal interview, 2019)

For Dingzhen, these 'unstable people' are daigouers, predominantly located in Thamel, this city's liminal tourist heaven (Thompson and Linder, 2014), and increasingly recognised as a burgeoning New Chinatown. The Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines a 'daigou' as "someone who lives outside China and purchases goods for those residing in China." Fran Martin (2017: 905) more abstractly characterises 'daigou' as "an opportunistic exploitation of temporary gaps." Juan Liu (a pseudonym), another informant, more bluntly defined daigouers as the "people who only care about making money." Liu continued,

> "These newcomers solely inhabit Nepal for financial reasons; if it were not for the money, they would immediately depart. The sole motive for coming to Nepal is monetary gain, isn't it? Otherwise, why would one choose to reside here." (Personal interview, 2020)

While daigouers are singled out by individuals like Dingzhen and Juan Liu, my fieldwork observations suggest that this specific group is often used to represent a broader category of people frequently moving between China and Nepal, which includes Vloggers. These identities are not neatly divided but rather overlap and are interchangeable. Many Chinese people I met in Nepal engage in multiple activities simultaneously. While their activities may vary, their motivations, mobility channels, and socio-political as well as cultural backgrounds are strikingly similar. In general, they all aim to achieve upward social mobility by leveraging their bodies, information, products, and other forms of capital amidst the flow of tourism between China and Nepal. Travel in this context becomes a creative response to the tensions ingrained within various trans-local structures in which they are otherwise marginalized.

To a great extent, Martin's definition of daigouers[9] also applies to Vloggers since, as I will discuss later, they too exploit gaps opportunistically—both temporary and geographical—which allows their videography practices to thrive. The comments made by Xiao P, Hua Chen, Dingzhen, and Juan Liu hint at the capital-driven nature of the contact zone, where most transnational movements are temporary as individuals follow the transnational flows of goods, money, and information, with few people remaining in one place for long. Given the temporality and transient nature of movements within this contact zone, individuals like Vloggers aim to maximise their capital (e.g., money, followers, likes) with minimal cost (e.g., time, expense) before they move on to their next destination. This requires them to create an "exploding point" (Ch. *bao dian*) of the host society as quickly as possible.

The exploding point that characterises many short videos in my archive, which I will soon analyse, is a parody overlaid with an exotic veneer and dominated by the creators' and audiences' anxiety about their everyday struggles amid China's unequal development. This anxiety, embodied in Vlogging about unusual travel experiences in a foreign land, typically centres around three themes: money, power, and sex. The Vlog that Xiao P sent me is a perfect example, as it touches on all these themes. In the video, a Chinese male Vlogger seeks to increase his earnings (garner more views and likes) by publicly showcasing his masculine power via his interactions with a more vulnerable Nepali female, repeatedly affirming her obedience to him. By emphasizing both characters' nationalities and engaging with potential Chinese audiences, individual feelings of power and the imagination of such are elevated to a national level, encouraging collective mental gratification and catharsis.

However, this anxiety and the methods used to address it are not universally shared. Factors such as gender, class, education, social relationships, and even the length of one's stay can influence how one perceives these themes. This could partially explain why individuals like Xiao P are repulsed by the short video she shared with me and its creator—it is because she does not equally share the anxiety of the Chinese male Vlogger. Despite this, Vlogging has become an increasingly prevalent practice in the Nepal-China contact zone, aiding many in their transnational mobility. In the following section, this chapter will demonstrate how

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[9] In this chapter, the primary focus will be on Vloggers. A more comprehensive comparative analysis of daigouers will be presented in subsequent chapters.

Chinese Vloggers' anxieties and pride surrounding money, power, and sex are expressed in Vlogging about 'one of the poorest countries in the world.'

Vlogging authenticity

The concept of a Vlog, an abbreviated form for the term 'video blog', refers to a medium through which individuals digitally encapsulate and disseminate their thoughts, opinions, or personal experiences across cyberspace (The Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). However, such a medium extends beyond a mere digital rendition of a traditional blog (Tolson, 2010) and provides an innovative avenue for information dissemination via a distinct media platform (Lockie, 2019). As Burgess and Green (2018: 37) eloquently illustrate, Vlogs, predominantly configured around a monologic narrative delivered directly to a camera, necessitate minimal technical sophistication and are often curated with limited editing. Despite the presence of certain commonalities across rules and formats, the rigid parameters characterising Vlogs frequently fail to delineate online media products due to their inherent dynamism, manifest in their propensity to amalgamate diverse forms, themes, and genres. Such dynamism underscores their multifaceted nature, rendering them "many things, and different things to different people" (Christian, 2009). Consequently, academic discourse has shifted from a prescriptive definition of Vlogs towards an understanding of their quintessence. In this regard, Vlogs have been conceptualised as "a specific form of digital storytelling practice" (Xu and Zhao, 2022: 261), or a novel form of self-representation, encapsulated in the practice of self-representation via Vlogging (Griffith and Papacharissi, 2009).

The evolutionary trajectory of Vlogging has been concomitant with the advancement of information technology and the expansion of the information society, with specific emphasis on the emergence and accelerated development of online video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. Nonetheless, the cultural milieu of Vlogging, albeit possibly identified through disparate nomenclatures and formats but sharing an analogous ethos of grassroots participation, predates the advent of new media platforms (Burgess and Green, 2018; Tripp, 2012). Prior to the advent of new media, the culture of video documentation was predominantly dictated by private entities employing portable cameras to capture news and events ostensibly overlooked by mainstream media, and subsequently distributing these personally curated videos as alternative information conduits (Tripp, 2012). Additionally, the rapid development and proliferation of smartphones with integrated cameras have proved to be a seminal influence, as

these devices "enable [people] to participate, as a way of being visually engaged with what is going on and being able to retransmit our own ways of seeing, points of view and feelings" (David, 2010: 93). The advent of such technological innovation has disrupted traditional cultural demarcations between private and public, proximal and distant, individual and collective, and present and past. These participatory tenets are undeniably incorporated into the cultural praxis of Vlogging. Leveraging cutting-edge technologies, Vlogs further obfuscate the boundaries between subjectivity and objectivity, giving rise to a form of simulated authenticity.

Vlogging, to a significant extent, aids in the creation and propagation of an 'authentic' image through its unique styles and themes, thus shaping audience perceptions. Many Vlogs, centred on self-expression, underscore the elements of "liveness, immediacy, and conversation" (Burgess & Green, 2018: 53). Vloggers commonly record and share quotidian experiences, personal views on societal issues, and conduct creative performances in routine environments. As noted by Tolson (2010: 286), the perceived authenticity of Vlogging is situated in its unabridged direct address, its overt amateurishness, and the sheer volume and immediacy of conversational responses. This transforms the conventional paradigm of human-computer-human communication into a more intimate form of "interpersonal face-to-face communication" (Burgess & Green, 2018: 53). Furthermore, audience engagement during the Vlogging process is not relegated to passive consumption. Embracing the participatory ethos of Web 2.0, audiences morph into co-creators or prosumers of the Vlogs that they consume. The participatory methods employed by audiences are multifarious and can range from specifying tasks for Vloggers to suggesting visitation of specific locales or interactions with people of interest. Whilst the preceding chapter highlighted the interactive nature of online travelogues, such interactivity is eclipsed by the engagement offered by Vlogs. Vlogs are often produced and uploaded in real-time during travels, offering a unique opportunity for Vloggers to modify their activities based on audience feedback concurrently. This dynamic nature is reflected in several Vlogs in my collection, which often commence with Vloggers' interactions with their audience, for instance, summarising the content of the previous video and reviewing viewers' responses. Some Vlogs initiate by responding to viewers' requests, such as "You have been asking me to visit this place. No problem, today, your wish will be fulfilled. Let's explore this place together." Some platforms even offer real-time commenting functions, which further augments the transformation of Vlog audiences from traditional viewers and commentators into active co-creators. For instance, the platform Bilibili, from which the majority of analysed Vlogs are sourced, facilitates a 'danmu' function that permits "users' comments to appear as

streams of scrolling subtitles overlaid on the video" (Ma, 2022: 214). This feature creates a sense of pseudo-synchronicity (Yeqi, 2017), fostering real-time interaction among users. The co-presence and synchronicity offered by *danmu* metamorphosise Vlogs from static media artefacts into communal digital spaces where ideas, values, emotions, and experiences can be shared, affirmed, challenged, and negotiated. The *danmu* subcultural environment within Bilibili reinforces the idea that audience comments are not merely peripheral to the cultural products, but rather, an inseparable and integral component of them, as exemplified by the popular saying that a video without danmu is incomplete. This comprehensive audience engagement in the prosuming process of Vlogs bolsters its function as a medium facilitating emotional exchange (Gibson, 2016), consequently enhancing the parasocial interaction between Vloggers and audiences (Chen, 2020) and reinforcing the bond of trust.

Indeed, one cannot underestimate the complex power dynamics that permeate Vlogging's capital-centric networks, including a wider set of actors beyond Vloggers and audiences, particularly platform entities in transnational contexts. The term 'platform' conveys an impression of neutrality and impartiality as it depicts social media juggernauts like YouTube, TikTok, and Bilibili as mere providers of services for sharing and viewing information. However, this notion is contradicted by the fact that each platform is defined by unique community regulations, user demographics with distinct interests, content preferences, functionalities, and, ultimately, a platform-specific culture. A clear manifestation of this is the *danmu* functionality, as previously mentioned, thus underpinning the assertion that discussions on the politics of Vlogging would be insufficient without taking into consideration the platform cultures in which it is deeply entrenched.

The creation of platform cultures necessitates a longitudinal process shaped by an array of online and offline factors. With the pervasive infusion of capital into these platforms, their purported neutrality has been fundamentally transformed. This process of capitalisation, or 'platformisation', has altered content creators' motivations and the logic behind their creations, thereby imposing limitations on their creativity (Kaye et al., 2021). However, the pathways provided by these platforms guide content creators on how to employ their creativity in attracting audience traffic, which can subsequently be monetised through tips from the audience, platform rewards, and third-party advertisements. This process invariably moulds and constrains many content creators' subjectivity, identities, and creations as they strive to operate under the optimal conditions set by the platforms to ensure visibility, virality, and

maximised traffic for monetisation. This encapsulates the impact of the globalised cultures, economies, and politics of online video-sharing platforms on content creators (Meng and Nansen, 2022).

Furthermore, platforms like YouTube and Bilibili, although functioning primarily as online communities, blur the boundaries between the virtual and the real. This is because online and offline societies are intrinsically interconnected and mutually influential. The conventional notion that the network society is a levelled transnational space for emancipation and unrestricted movements has recently been critiqued by scholars. As Fuchs (2007: 74) posits, these spaces are exclusive, centralised, and hierarchical rather than inclusive, open, and participatory. The ideology of the network society conceals the capitalist relations and structural inequalities that shape contemporary society. An increasing number of events, such as the banning of Google and Meta by the Chinese government, and the prohibition of TikTok by the Trump administration in the USA and Modi government in India (e.g. Mishra et al., 2022), suggest that geopolitical contests in the real world have penetrated virtual transnational spaces, if these two realms were ever separate.

The power imbalances present in the real world are also perceptible in the 'virtual' spaces sculpted by global Vlogging practices. As exemplified in the analysis of white expatriates' Vlogging about South Korea, Oh and Oh (2017: 698) draw parallels between contemporary Western Vlogs about Asia and colonial travel writing, positing that they are "global texts about the exotic other" that fundamentally highlight white/colonial supremacy. From a different perspective, focusing on the South Korean diaspora in Mexico and their Vlogs centred on diasporic everyday life, Han (2019)proposes that global otherness, underscored by race, skin colour, and language, remains prominently featured in Asian diasporic media self-representations. In addition, Rahman (2018) unveils the homogenising power of global consumer culture that reduces individual young female content creators' hijab-centric Vlogs to common stereotypes. Conversely, other scholars highlight the heterogeneous power dynamics in transnational Vlogging. For instance, Ma (2022) suggests that the white supremacy projected by China-based Western male Vloggers is constrained by and negotiated with China's rising nationalist sentiment. Furthermore, Swan (2021) suggests that some Western female Vloggers in South Korea prioritise the foundational functions of Vlogs, such as emotional exchange and community building, over commercial achievements. Lee's (2021) study on how YouTubers creatively translate their work for a broader global viewership concludes that audiences from

different language constituencies develop a sense of community through the translation process. This brief literature review, despite the diversity of academic perspectives, illustrates the multiplicity of power dynamics that traverse from the material realm to shape transcultural Vlogging practices in the 'virtual' world.

Hence, an examination of contemporary Chinese tourist Vlogs themed around Nepal necessitates consideration of a complex matrix involving transnational online and offline networks. Furthermore, an investigation into how money, power, and sex are intertwined with the representation of the Himalayan country should also incorporate connections to the host society, home country, and the monetization-centric environment on the platforms. Given the multitude of power dynamics at play, the extent to which Chinese tourist Vlogs can genuinely represent Nepal is contestable. Even if these Vlogs manage to offer an authentic portrayal, the ownership of this authenticity remains an open question. In response to these critical and unavoidable inquiries, Caitlin Adams's (2022) proposition of the "mimic vlog" concept offers significant insights.

According to Adams (2022: 24-25), a mimic vlog is a type of parody of the existing user-generated format of a Vlog. Audiences perceive these texts as authentic due to their ability to decode genre conventions. This concept adeptly encapsulates the unstable boundary between parodies and genuine Vlogs, a distinction drawn on apparent formats rather than content. Based on this notion, the majority of tourist Vlogs in my archive can be classified as mimicry. Utilising the format of Vlogs, these content pieces aim to sell an 'authentic' exotic narrative to audiences in China. The considerable number of Likes (around twenty-nine thousand at the time of archiving) suggests that Xiaodao's Vlog presents an accepted version of Nepal, characterised by a young female, religious activities, and a submission to China, appealing to a large market in China.

Furthermore, its 'successful' construction of authenticity hinges on many Chinese people's imagination of asymmetrical international systems, in which relations among states are hierarchical, and China, replacing the West, is emerging or even has emerged as a dominant power. While this perception of international relations among ordinary Chinese people appears decolonising on the surface – implying the narrative of China challenging the existing West-dominated international systems – it remains profoundly constrained by linear colonial concepts of development and modernity. Here, China's role is perceived as replacing the West

and inheriting its colonial legacy, including the imagination of far-off places like Nepal, despite its geographical proximity to China.

Consequently, the Vlogs from my archive can be considered mimicry. They employ emerging new media formats with strong connotations of authenticity and intimacy to visualise many Chinese people's imaginations, desires, and frustrations about possessing or being denied power.

The Embodiment of Money, Power, and Sex in Vlogs

As delineated in the preceding discussion, Vlogs collated in the subject archive strategically endeavour to generate or mimic specific points of explosion with the intent to harness audience attention. This captivation is subsequently converted into a form of currency through the extant monetisation mechanisms of the digital platforms on which these Vlogs are hosted. These points of explosion are frequently spatially embedded within the mundane landscapes of local societal settings, including but not limited to eateries, retail outlets, public thoroughfares, and diverse domestic environments.

In one sense, the emphasis on these everyday contexts, as opposed to spaces or activities characterised by exceptionality, is in adherence with the foundational ethos of Vlogging. The ostensible depiction of these uncurated routine spaces can provoke a semblance of authenticity among the audience, amplifying their connection with the Vlogger. Contrastingly, in another sense, the proclivity of Vloggers towards commonplace video settings is dictated by the inherent limitations imposed by accessibility.

Despite the strategic self-portrayal by numerous Vloggers as seasoned and resourceful travellers within their Vlogs, their actual mobility and degree of access are markedly constrained beyond the camera's lens for a multitude of reasons, which include fiscal constraints, an insufficiency of information, limited duration of stay, an underdeveloped social network, and linguistic barriers. Observations drawn from my field research reveal that a significant fraction of Chinese Vloggers is heavily reliant on viewing the content of their contemporaries' Vlogs to define their own thematic direction and geographic locations. In addition, they are dependent on their longer-staying Chinese compatriots in Nepal for the acquisition of local materials that hold the potential to be exploited as points of explosion.

In numerous instances encountered during my research, these purportedly unique local materials are articulated in the form of unsubstantiated rumours that have gained wide circulation among the Chinese populace residing in Nepal, entrenched stereotypes, and even content drawn from other Vlogs. Consequently, public spaces characterised by ease of accessibility, inclusive of tourist zones and commonplace everyday locales, have evolved into the predominant settings for the majority of Vlogs present within my archive.
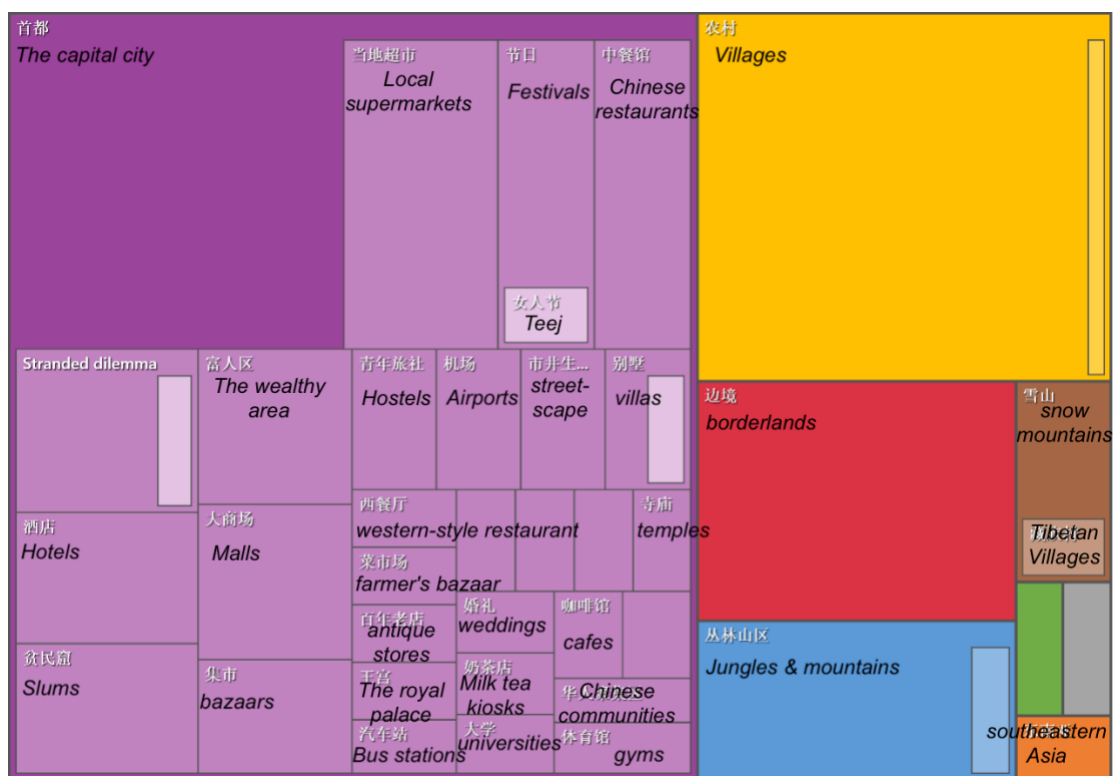
Figure 18 A chart of the Vlogs' spatial settings

The chart above offers a visualisation of the spatial preferences among the Vlogs collected in my archive. To distil the chart's analysis, a larger square corresponds to a higher preference among Vloggers for a particular locale. Spatial codes are derived either directly from the Vlog titles or inferred post-observation of the Vlogs' content. The chart illuminates that over half of the Vlogs in the archive are situated within Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city. These Vlogs predominantly revolve around sites such as local supermarkets, malls, hotels, affluent residential areas, Chinese restaurants, and impoverished slums. Approximately one-third of the Vlogs in my archive are set in non-metropolitan contexts, wherein the focus of Chinese Vloggers is primarily directed towards rural settlements, border regions, jungles, and mountains. The significance of spatial settings for Vlogs is intertwined with their capacity to

accommodate specific activities that facilitate narrative building within the Vlogs. As articulated in the preceding discourse, the narratives spun by these Vlogs predominantly grapple with the themes of money, power, and sex. Locales such as supermarkets, restaurants, hotels, and villages provide the backdrop for these themes to unfold.

For example, certain Vlogs record experiences of visiting Kathmandu's supermarkets or dining in local restaurants as avenues to assess local economic growth. Affluent urban areas and slums serve as platforms upon which Chinese Vloggers can critique the stratification of local society. Numerous Vloggers attribute these disparities to the caste system, albeit their analysis often exhibits a superficial understanding of the caste system, grounded in oversimplified analogies drawn from Indian contexts. Moreover, non-urban landscapes, as portrayed in many Vlogs, become the canvas upon which Vloggers evaluate the urban-rural development gap in Nepal. Additionally, spaces such as shopping malls and universities transform into arenas for satisfying Vloggers' sexual gazes.

In many instances, the spatial settings, accommodated activities, and inferred themes are explicitly indicated in the Vlogs' titles. These titles not only aim to attract potential audiences but also strive to enhance video visibility through platform algorithms, thereby expanding viewership. The algorithm, far from being a neutral entity, is shaped by socio-cultural specifications.

In a multitude of cases, the Vlog titles alone bear a dramatic resonance, even in the absence of the video content. For instance, "Are there more chances (of success) doing business in backward countries? The Chinese elder brother who does business in Nepal will tell you about business advantages here" (Damingdelvxing, 2019a), "Bravo! After knowing Nepali people's salaries, I am impressed by China's development!" (Detective Lei, 2017a), or "Let us see how Nepalis swindle money out of Chinese customers, repeating in Chinese: give me an RMB note." (DatouXiaotouqulvxing, 2020a). The dramatisation of Vlog titles is predicated on a conflict or a point of explosion that infuses the drama with meaning and directs the audience's viewing motivation. As these instances illustrate, the conflict in many Vlogs from my archive is erected on the comparative contrasts drawn between Nepal and China, predicated on the imagined measurability of development across these two countries.

In this context, these Vlogs can be viewed as Sino-centric, as without the comparative Chinese perspective, the significance of Nepal diminishes within these narratives. However, labelling these Vlogs as Sino-centric does not imply that they are universally propagating nationalist sentiments. Even though many Vlogs seemingly belittle Nepal as a backward and underdeveloped country in an effort to mirror China's rapid development and relative stronger power, the narratives are permeated with layered emotions and motivations imbued with nuanced subtleties. For instance, the successful business experiences of Chinese entrepreneurs in Nepal are not only celebrations of advanced Chinese commercial acumen vis-à-vis the amateur Nepali market but also imply the saturation and stratification of the domestic market in China, forcing less powerful actors to pivot their focus towards less developed markets. The multi-layered information is often not dominated by the Vlog itself but rather contextualised within specific cultural and socio-political backdrops and activated through the active participation of the audience. Consequently, I argue that Vlogging about 'authentic' local materials is more reflective of China than Nepal. The authenticity of the host society becomes compromised when it is constrained by the language and perspective of a single nation.

Figure 19 A Vlog clip from (Damingdelvxing, 2019b)(1)

Figure 20 A Vlog clip from (DatouXiaotouqulvxing, 2020)(1)

This section will therefore go on to investigate two Vlogs from my archive that have garnered the highest number of views. Intriguingly, both these Vlogs revolve around a similar theme - exploring the cost of dining out in Kathmandu, specifically at KFC restaurants.

The first Vlog, created by Daming, had attracted approximately 710 thousand views on Bilibili at the time of my access. As indicated by the description on his account homepage (https://space.bilibili.com/10636228), Daming is a professional Vlogger whose experience largely comprises Vlogging in China's neighbouring countries and marginalised areas within China. The second Vlog is the product of Datou and Xiaotou (D&X), a couple who travel and

Vlog together (https://space.bilibili.com/350605014). In 2020, they spent roughly four months in Nepal Vlogging. The Vlog included in my archive had accrued more than 458 thousand views at the time of my access.

Daming's Vlog is titled, "Eating at the KFC restaurant in Nepal is not afforded by normal local people! BTW, the girl at the cashier is gorgeous!" whereas D&X's Vlog is named, "Eating at the KFC restaurant in one of the poorest countries in the world costs us so much! How luxurious it is!". Although both Vloggers selected KFC as their setting, the specific restaurants they visited differed. Daming's chosen location is situated in Durbar Marg, while D&X opted for a KFC branch located within the Bhatbhateni Supermarket along the ring road.

The content of both Vlogs documents the entire dining process, encompassing introductory dialogues outside the restaurants, entry into the establishments, ordering food at the counter, an overview of the restaurant environment, the display of food, and consuming the meals in front of the camera. Furthermore, both Vlogs are relatively short in duration (Daming's Vlog spans 2:47, while D&X's Vlog lasts 3:53), with the substantial segment being occupied by the demonstration of food and the act of eating. A salient distinction between these two Vlogs lies in their interaction patterns. In D&X's Vlog, the interactions primarily occur between the couple, and for the majority of the time, it is only Datou who addresses the camera directly.

*Figure 21 A Vlog clip from (*DatouXiaotouqulvxing*, 2020)(2)*

D: As you can see, this establishment occupies merely a single floor, and the floor space is considerably small. The current time is 17:35, and you can observe only a few customers. Given that a majority of Nepali individuals earn around six hundred yuan each month, dining at KFC proves truly extravagant for them.

*Figure 22 A Vlog clip from (*DatouXiaotouqulvxing*, 2020)(3)*

D: Hence, as shown here, my order today came up to 1725 rupees (equivalent to 101 yuan). Let's inspect what we have received. I've opted for something rather local.

*Figure 23 A Vlog clip from (*Damingdelvxing*, 2019b)(2)*

In Daming's Vlog, a Nepali youth is featured, although the precise relationship between the youth and Daming remains undisclosed. Throughout their meal, Daming consistently poses questions to the young man.

> "Daming (DM): KFC is considered among the upscale eateries in Kathmandu, isn't it? The costs here are rather high, correct?
>
> Nepali young man (N): (Nods in agreement) Yes.
>
> DM: So, for individuals earning roughly five to six hundred (RMB yuan), dining here could be a strain, wouldn't it?
>
> N: They…
>
> DM: It would be too costly for them.
>
> N: They don't frequent here at all.
>
> DM: (Understandingly) They abstain from coming here.
>
> N: So few people dine here. (N nods in agreement)"

Both Vlogs shift the focus to the stark disparity between the exorbitant costs of dining at KFC and the relatively low local incomes. In D&X's Vlog, the flavour of the food is additionally evaluated. However, this aspect is entirely omitted in Daming's Vlog. The language employed in both videos is Chinese Mandarin. Nevertheless, in Daming's Vlog, the Nepali participant does not exhibit sufficient proficiency to understand the conversation or articulate his views in Chinese. Consequently, despite the conversation suggesting that Daming is soliciting information from the local participant, it concludes as if Daming already has the answers and performs as though he is the one imparting knowledge, not the other way around.

The aforementioned summary encapsulates the content of the two most-viewed Vlogs in the collected data. Their visual elements seem straightforward, guileless, and even haphazardly assembled. In one sense, this simplicity mirrors the authenticity and intimacy inspired by the Vlogging format. On the other hand, it implies the Vloggers' inability to undertake more complex Vlogging activities. Their Vlogging style could be termed non-interactive interaction. Neither D&X's observational experiment in the restaurant nor Daming's conversation with the local informant truly facilitates meaningful interaction with local participants. More prominently, the Vlogs project prejudiced views of Nepal, and the formation of these views commences long before the exploration of the Vlogs - even prior to the Vloggers setting foot in the foreign territory. Consequently, engaging effectively with local participants is not a necessary prerequisite for Vlogging because Chinese Vloggers do not bear any responsibility towards the host society. Their responsibility, interests, and motivation lie with the Chinese audience, as they bring the views that can be monetised.

On Bilibili, a genre of Vlogs documenting dining experiences at global fast-food chains such as KFC and McDonald's in non-Western regions has emerged. Many of these Vlogs focus on Asian and African countries, which the Vloggers categorise as economically underdeveloped. Though varying in specifics, many adopt a similar narrative pattern of Vloggers dining at these eateries and commenting on the high costs relative to the low local incomes. Some Vlogs further illustrate this disparity to intensify the contrast. For example, a Vlog about eating at a KFC in Malawi suggests in its title that a family bucket costs locals half a month's wages (SAO, 2018). Another Vlog is titled, "In Africa, with three days' wage, people cannot afford a meal in KFC" (Chuangfeizhouxiaopangzi, 2023). Additionally, some Vlogs emphasise the scarcity of such global fast-food chains in the region. In these vlogs, American fast food represents a

universal benchmark of modernity and a development milestone. This genre's proliferation on the Chinese internet suggests a new way of conceptualising modernity. Scholars (e.g. Chan, 2006) have previously noted that Chinese tourists often evaluate other countries' modernity and development when travelling abroad. This behaviour is motivated by a mix of humiliation and a hope for progress. While many contemporary Chinese Vlogs still seek to assess other countries' modernity and development, their stance as privileged modern observers is evident. Nonetheless, as eating-KFC Vlogs become a subculture, specific rules, like themes, narrative angles, and actors, solidify, and the messages these Vlogs should and can convey are also regulated. Therefore, for these vlogs, geographical, cultural, economic, and political differences do not genuinely matter as they simply decorate the same story.

Despite the reduced complexity of the visual narrative presented in these Vlogs, it is noteworthy that they metamorphose into a 'deep' living text, collectively reshaped and reinterpreted by the audience's shared experiences, critiques, validations, and an array of ideas and emotion exchanges with respect to the dichotomy of 'us' versus 'them'.

Figure 24 Vlog reviewers' comments

The extracted comments featured under both Vlogs serve as salient examples. Rather than merely perpetuating the judgmental undertones of the Vlogs, which portray Nepal as a country deficient in the features of modernity, these audience contributions introduce an additional

layer of nuanced interpretations to the video content. They establish connections with the Chinese audience's collective nostalgia and contemporary anxieties. It is common for viewers to utilise the comment section as a space to reminisce about their past experiences dining at KFC over a decade ago. This period marks a time when Western-style fast food symbolised an unattainable and luxurious form of modernity to the Chinese populace. An implicit message conveyed through these nostalgia-driven comments is the acknowledgement of a transformed present marked by the unrestricted accessibility to Western-style fast food. On a similar thread, the discussion of contemporary economic development and equitable wealth distribution in China emerges, with certain viewers expressing anxiety over their perceived inability to afford commodities considered readily accessible to others.

However, what is particularly striking is the conspicuous absence of Nepal itself in these multifaceted interpretations. A scant number of comments refer to Nepal, and those that do largely express a range of emotions - from regret and shame to sympathy. The existence of these sentiments is predicated on the epistemological fixation of the audience that perceives Nepal as a nation steeped in poverty and lacking advancement. With these preconceived notions rooted in their worldview, they forego probing into the multifaceted and distinct meanings that dining experiences could potentially hold for diverse individuals, especially when the consumed food represents an external culture. Emanating from the essence of the Vlogs, the audience also resorts to distilling complex socio-cultural realities into easily digestible snapshots. Their sympathy, however, is not primarily directed towards the Nepali populace but rather manifests as a blend of self-congratulation for having navigated beyond such 'backward' stages and a form of pity for the Nepali individuals featured in the Vlogs who are presumed to be unable to share in the privileges of development.

In summary, the Vlogs and audience comments materialise into a specific form of practice that utilises the purported adversities of 'them' as a reflective mirror on the lives of 'us'. These assumed hardships are mediated and narrated through the lens of the Vlogs, laden with a substantial connotation of authenticity. However, for the Vloggers and audience, the authenticity of the experiences documented within the Vlogs does not pertain to the 'real' lives of others. Instead, it serves to reaffirm their preconceived notion of Nepal as a socio-economically deprived nation. This pivotal realisation is exploited and manipulated to cater to various actors' specific objectives and narratives.

In adopting the user-generated format of Vlogs to deliver institutionalised parodies of developmental narratives, various layers of power dynamics are encoded within these entities, encompassing both the Vlog itself and the subsequent viewer comments. To a significant degree, these Vlogs are less about Nepal and more focused on entities like KFC, which in these narratives, becomes emblematic of power. The capacity or inability to afford dining at KFC emerges as a symbolic representation of one's modern status. Within these Vlogs, the power derived from dining at KFC transcends into other forms such as bestowing modernity upon local individuals perceived as disadvantaged (e.g., inviting locals to dine at these fast-food restaurants), objectification through a sexual gaze (e.g., irrelevant commentary about female staff), economic development imagery, and ultimately, the consumption of an imagined and constructed narrative of others' suffering as suggested by audience comments.

The association between dining at KFC and the power of modernity is an artificially constructed and reinforced notion built upon the experiences and collective memory of a generation of Chinese for whom Western-style fast food epitomised an extravagant modern lifestyle (see Watson, 2000; Yan, 2012). This perception offers many Chinese individuals a lens to envision an America-centric modern life. In lieu of exploring the diverse interpretations and implementations of modernity within Nepal, numerous Chinese Vloggers hastily transpose their conceptualisation of modern life onto a different cultural context, with their perceived or assumed modern identities serving as protective measures to facilitate this grafting process. More fundamentally, the emphasis placed by these Vlogs on KFC and other Western-centric indicators as representations of development and modernity underscore the hegemonic power of the Occidental linear conceptualisation of modernity and the inherent materialistic aspects it encompasses. In this respect, the state of being modern equates to the possession and practice of specific items, a comparative process dictated predominantly by the West, as opposed to a static state.

The propensity to assess poverty and developmental indices in Nepal differentiates most Vlogs from the travelogues discussed in the preceding chapter. To a significant degree, the portrayal of Nepal as a poor, regressive, and chaotic nation allows Chinese Vloggers to assume the roles of modern explorers and adventurers, engaging in adventurous activities within an exotic environment. This shift in narrative perspective also alters the meanings attributed to recurring figures that also appear in travelogues. Therefore, the innocent faces of children, which, for middle-class tourists, typically symbolise the host society's naturalness and hospitality, are

reinterpreted as indicators of ignorance, savagery, and societal decay. Romantic encounters, which are otherwise perceived as indicative of the local males' laziness and twisted desire for an improved life, become sexualized. Any slight indication of reluctance on the part of local individuals to interact with the Vloggers is construed as evidence of an unhealthy degree of introversion. These revised interpretations craft a narrative filled with implicit dangers lurking in the shadows, poised to threaten the Vloggers at any given moment.

Nana's Vlog serves as a fitting example, narrating the experiences of a young Chinese woman navigating encounters with Kathmandu's street beggars. Nana's Vlog commences with a continuous long shot documenting the Vlogger's meandering journey along a street in Thamel. She encounters two beggars—an adult male and a young boy—within a span of a few seconds. The camera, positioned ahead of her, captures the entire interaction. The unedited long shot reinforces the Vlog's authenticity and vividly showcases how potential threats, represented by the homeless beggars on the street, actively approach the unprepared vlogger.

*Figure 25 Vlogs clips from (*ChufabaNana*, 2020)*

Moreover, the camera fully captures Nana's multifaceted reactions, encapsulating her shock, fear, hesitation, confusion, and crucially, her resolve to refrain from giving the beggars cash. Having discouraged the adult beggar, Nana leads the boy to a grocery store, where she buys him a packet of biscuits and a bottle of water. This action serves as an alternative demonstration of her humanitarian sympathy without encouraging the boy's begging habits. On exiting the store, Nana prompts the boy to express gratitude for the kindness shown, however, the boy merely mumbles an unclear response and departs with his food. The camera subsequently pans away from the boy to a group of local men watching the interaction unfold, implying their apparent indifference.

Contrasting Nana's quietly resilient persona, Detective Lei's character as portrayed in his Vlogs, is assertive, adventurous, and overt in his quest for the exotic. Detective Lei serves as both the name of the Vlogger and the character he embodies in his Vlogs. This character is a young, audacious, and experienced Chinese adventurer "visiting the lost ancient ruins and exploring mysteries to human", as described in his Bilibili homepage (accessed on 5th May 2020). In a self-introduction update, he is described as a "scholar of the Silk Road" (Accessed on 11 February 2023). Detective Lei adopts the persona of Indiana Jones, the fictional professor of Archaeology portrayed by Harrison Ford in the Hollywood franchise series. Through his Vlogs, Detective Lei delivers mimicked adventures in Thailand, India, and Nepal. While witchcraft serves as a thematic element in his Thai Vlogs, his adventures in Nepal transpire amidst decaying rural settings and slums where, as a 'detective', Lei actively explores rather than passively waiting for encounters as Nana does. Detective Lei's assertive and probing Vlogging style has proven successful, with three of his Vlogs occupying places amongst the ten most-viewed vlogs from my archive (3rd, 5th, and 10th). Two of these vlogs are believed to have been filmed in villages in Tarai, which he describes as "being back to the primitive society overnight", and one filmed in Bhadgaon following an earthquake. These Vlogs comprise a collection of unconnected, poverty-stricken scenes taken from domestic private spaces, often focusing on specific items such as an old pot containing leftover rice. In some instances, images of these domestic spaces are captured from outside with a zoomed-in lens, suggesting a covert peeping angle. However, these depictions of 'poverty' are compiled together under titles like "Detective Lei visiting the poor family in Nepal; cigarettes are sold separately but the furniture is produced with tiger skin" (Detective Lei, 2018).

Figure 26 Vlogs clips from Detective Lei, 2018

The transition of the detective figure, a cultural emblem hailing from Western narratives of modernity and civilisation, from being a "reflective or paradigmatic narrative" to a "locally

engaged, formally diverse, and discursively productive text" (Pearson and Singer, 2009: 3), serves as a fascinating point of analysis. Detective Lei's self-casting as a detective, akin to an all-knowing and all-powerful colonial archaeologist, ostensibly garbed in a mantle of scientific objectivity, profoundly uncovers the enduring impact of colonial paradigms. Furthermore, it provides a window into his implicit and explicit ambitions to incorporate Nepal within this paradigmatic framework. Hence, his vigorous exploration of poverty within Nepal could be interpreted as a hegemonic effort to assimilate the perceived 'backward' Nepal into a more structured community with shared ideologies, values, reason, and rule.

Nana, despite being portrayed as a somewhat passive traveller who does not actively solicit interaction with the local populace, subtly conveys her self-perception of a privileged identity over the indigenous population. Her advocacy, explicitly communicated towards the end of her Vlog, discouraging her Chinese compatriots from financially indulging the locals, thereby preventing them from becoming the target of their rapacity, also indicates her self-perception of superior identity. The source of her moral obligation to assist the disadvantaged Nepali people can be traced to a sense of superiority, powered by China's nationalist pride rooted predominantly in its developmental triumphs. However, the same nationalist sentiment, with its inherent insecurities, predicates her caution towards the local population. This caution is informed by the propagated narrative that being Chinese, particularly affluent, predisposes one to be perceived as an easy target in potentially hostile foreign landscapes.

Detective Lei's metamorphosis from self-styling as a colonial explorer to an academic of the Silk Road and the role of vlogs as platforms for discourse on the aspirations and limitations of China's global leadership capacity by Vloggers and audiences alike, underscore the contemporary Chinese Vlogs' sensitivity towards the shifting power dynamics on the national and international stage.

China's expressed intent to assist Nepal in addressing its development challenges and the envisioned incorporation of Nepal into China's global community is consistent with the trajectory of Nepal-China relations in recent years. This forms part of China's broader ambition to construct a Community with a Shared Future for humankind, as proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping (2021). This ideology emphasises the principle of equal treatment of all nations, fostering cooperation towards common interests and the pursuit of sustainable development.

Nonetheless, the rhetoric of a shared future, while advocating equal status among all nations, strategically positions China as a dominant global leader, thereby challenging the established Western-centric international system (Nathan and Zhang, 2021). The ideological justification for China's self-proclaimed position of leadership can be traced to its historical *Tianxia* worldview, as discussed in Chapter One. While the contemporary Chinese state has moved beyond its ancient perception of Nepal as barbaric, the notion of Nepal and China as equal neighbours within the same community, as promoted by the rhetoric, merits scrutiny. The concept of a shared community fails to provide tangible and effective solutions to redress the asymmetrical power relations that permeate virtually every interaction zone between the two nations. The cooperation between Nepal and China is often manifested as Nepal's participation in China's community in exchange for assistance, a sentiment encapsulated in President Xi's commitment during his state visit to Nepal in 2019 to "help" transform land-locked Nepal into a "land-linked" country (Nepal, 2019). However, the choice of the linked final destination is not within Nepal's purview.

The digital landscape is not solely inhabited by Chinese Vloggers sensitive to the shifting dynamics of power that ripple across the Nepal-China contact zone. This awareness is equally palpable in the work of the Nepali content creator known by his online alias, Nepali Bruce Lee (N.B.L.), who produces content for the Chinese internet platform, Douyin. N.B.L., seemingly in his twenties, is the sole Nepali content creator who consistently creates and disseminates content on the Chinese internet included in my archive.

Like many foreign content creators with a limited understanding of Chinese popular culture, N.B.L. chose the name of the Hong Kong-born Hollywood martial arts film star Bruce Lee as his online moniker. His actual identity remains a mystery. During my time in Nepal, I encountered various rumours about him circulating within the Kathmandu-based Chinese community. Some of these rumours, subscribing to the prevalent stereotype among the Chinese community that unprivileged Nepalis belong to lower castes, painted him as a low-caste Nepali. These narratives suggested he was unemployed and frequented Thamel, hoping to chance upon opportunities from tourists. Allegedly, he honed his Chinese language skills through conversations with Chinese tourists. Other rumours questioned his Nepali identity, asserting that he was, in reality, an Indian posing as a Nepali, a façade supposedly motivated by the Chinese community's disfavour towards Indians.

The common thread in these narratives was the transformation of a local, unemployed young man into an influencer on the Chinese internet, attributing this metamorphosis to his fluency in the Chinese language acquired from interactions with tourists. This characterisation holds some validity if the number of followers is regarded as a critical determinant of an influencer's status. By May 2021, N.B.L. had garnered approximately 239 thousand followers on Douyin, an impressive feat given his superior fluency in Chinese compared to many Chinese learners I encountered in Nepal.

The majority of N.B.L.'s content is succinct, with most videos only running for a few seconds. These clips usually feature N.B.L. addressing the camera informally. As an influencer with a predominantly mainland Chinese following, N.B.L. has developed a knack for engaging his audience and patrons. Besides casual interactions with his followers, a significant portion of his Vlogs is dedicated to unabashed expressions of admiration for China's developmental achievements. For instance, in one Vlog, he lavishes praise on the so-called Chinese speed, referring to a train derailment incident that was resolved in less than 24 hours. In another Vlog, he dons a coat and scarf gifted to him by a Chinese follower, offering a salute to China and his Chinese friends. Additionally, he occasionally features in the works of other Chinese Vloggers, where he is typically asked to showcase his proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, sometimes Chinese dialects, and share his thoughts on China, which usually take the form of effusive, clichéd praise that he has previously reiterated on numerous occasions.
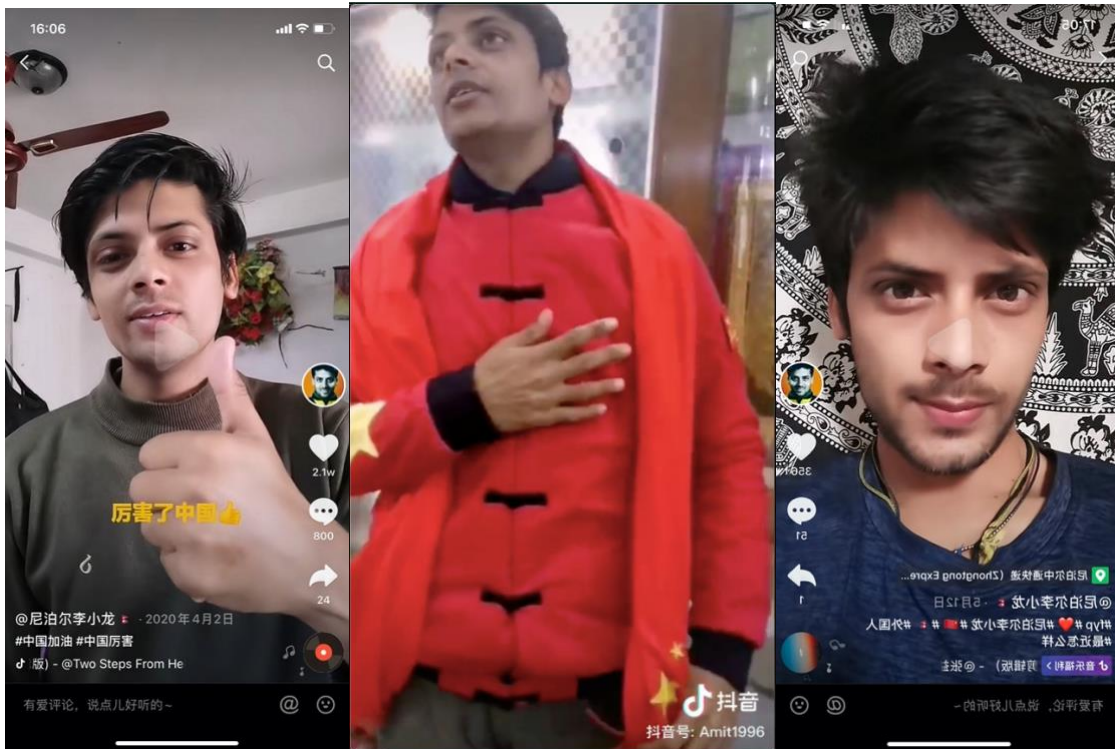
Figure 27 "Bravo, China!" (N. B. L., 2020a)

Figure 28 A Vlog clip from (N. B. L., 2020b)

Figure 29 A Vlog clip from (N. B. L., 2020c)

A recurrent theme in N.B.L's Vlogs is the portrayal of asymmetrical 'hard' powers between the two nations, which are often characterised through a paradigm of dominant Chinese masculinity. This forms the fundamental hierarchical logic of his Vlogs, with China personified not as an impersonal monolith but rather through the concrete, ordinary Chinese males who feature in his content.

N.B.L frequently narrates 'accidental' encounters with Chinese tourists, predominantly male, on the streets of Thamel. Referring to these Chinese male tourists as "old bro" (Ch. *lao ge/da ge*), N.B.L frequently presents himself as a *diao si* (literally translates to 'dick string', colloquially used to denote a 'loser'; for an analysis of *diao si* as a form of infrapolitics, refer to Yang et al., 2015). Frequently, these interactions pivot towards inquiries regarding his plans to visit China, to which N.B.L typically responds by bemoaning his financial incapacity. Often, these discussions on monetary capability segue into conversations about romantic liaisons with female partners. Chinese tourists, both male and female, express keen interest in N.B.L's experiences with Chinese women, prompting him to explain his financial limitations and the resultant inaccessibility of Chinese women. Sometimes, he solicits introductions to Chinese

women from these tourists. Within N.B.L's Vlogs, power, money, and sex are intimately intertwined - possession or deprivation of one typically implies and influences the possession or deprivation of the others. By depicting himself as a Nepali male 'loser', N.B.L places himself at the bottom of a hierarchical structure within his Vlogs, where Chinese males reign supreme and Chinese females occupy an unstable middle ground, perceived simultaneously as a marker of success in the modern global world and an unattainable illusion for Nepali men like himself.

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, N.B.L has become noticeably less verbose in his Vlogs. To a large extent, the pandemic has severed his connection with the country to which he has professed his loyalty, love, and admiration. With a decrease in Chinese tourists visiting Nepal and a dearth of new material for praising China, his Vlogs have evolved into largely silent affairs. He now primarily uses his 'exotic' appearance to maintain viewer engagement and attract additional traffic. To a certain degree, N.B.L's fate mirrors that of his country, as they both strive to sustain a complex friendship characterised by disparities in power. During President Xi's 2019 visit to Nepal, a local newspaper, myRepublic, published a response by an ordinary Nepali reader who emphasised the deep-rooted friendship between the two nations and expressed optimism that Xi's visit would strengthen these ties (Karki, 2019). While the assertion of mutual dependence between Nepal and China holds true, the authenticity of such a friendship is questionable, given that it appears contingent upon factors such as money, power, and sex. These elements, although atypical for defining friendships, are integral to the narratives of my archive, fuelling Chinese interest in Nepal and shaping their understanding of the country.

However, simply analysing the content of these Vlogs and their macro-level relations with colonial legacy and state power does not provide comprehensive insights into why money, power, and sex are focal points for these Vloggers, or why 'developing' countries like Nepal emerge as lands of opportunity for realising their aspirations. Most importantly, it does not clarify how these events transpire: how are decisions made, what facilitates their mobility, and what are the constraints? How does the host society respond? The subsequent section of this chapter will begin to address these questions, laying the groundwork for the continued exploration throughout the remainder of this thesis. Specifically, the following section aims to delineate the general trajectories and critical junctures of the Vloggers' journeys, in terms of their (im)mobility.

Embedded in the disjunctive flows of low-end globalisation

Situated within the complex dynamics of grassroots globalisation that traverse the geopolitical boundaries of Nepal and China, an individual of particular interest is Xiangluotianwai (XLTW), an influential Vlogger and informant for this study. His digital narratives, commonly known as Vlogs, predominantly concentrate on elucidating travel experiences within China's adjacent territories and borderlands. Through a single digital platform, XLTW has successfully cultivated an online following of approximately 600,000, and consequentially, at the time of our interview, the cumulative traffic generated from his digital narratives, in conjunction with other ancillary benefits, yielded a substantial annual revenue exceeding 300,000 RMB yuan (roughly equivalent to 33,000 British pounds). Moreover, he has effectively transitioned these narratives into print media, authoring a book detailing his various anecdotes of travel.

According to an online travelogue (XLTW, 2018), XLTW's humble beginnings were in an isolated village in the southwestern periphery of Yunnan province in China. An inherent restlessness and desire to explore realms beyond his provincial hamlet propelled him to venture from his home at the tender age of sixteen. He subsequently relocated to Guangdong province, an emblem of China's rapid economic development, where he initially served as a wall painter's apprentice and sequentially experimented with an array of professions. This era of transiency and instability persisted for approximately a decade, punctuated with extensive intra-national travel, serving as a panacea for the inherent loneliness concomitant with solitary employment detached from familial comfort.

The trajectory of XLTW's career experienced a paradigm shift around 2018, corresponding with the nascent institutionalisation and industrialisation of the Vlogging sector within China. Digital platforms such as Bilibili and Douyin commenced aggressive strategies to cultivate and develop influential digital content creators, fostering their creative loyalty with generous financial subsidies. Capitalising on this burgeoning opportunity, XLTW harmonised his personal interests with his professional trajectory, thereby instigating his nomadic existence. Initial ventures were financed through accumulated savings, supplemented by the monetisation of his digital narratives to offset travel expenses. As the popularity and viewership of his Vlogs proliferated, he strategically transitioned his digital narrative creation into his primary income source. In 2019, a 21-part digital Vlog delineating his experiences traversing Nepal amassed over ten million views. However, as elucidated in our interview, his current itinerant lifestyle

and globetrotting are merely ephemeral phases; he does not envisage maintaining this lifestyle perpetually (personal interview, 2021).

Another crucial participant is Hostel Keeper Feng (Feng), a Chinese Vlogger residing in Nepal, operating primarily on the Douyin platform. Contrary to his contemporaries, Feng's Vlogs encapsulate his quotidian experiences within Nepal, a reflection of his dual responsibilities as a digital content creator and the proprietor of a hostel situated on the outskirts of Thamel. When queried regarding his impetus for creating digital narratives, he succinctly responded, "converting traffic into revenue" (personal interview, 2021). Moreover, Feng astutely integrates his Vlogs with promotional content, showcasing commercial products such as Nepali handmade cashmere, miniature Thangka, and Iranian saffron.

During my observation of Feng's Vlog production process at his hostel's garden, it was evident that his methodology contradicts the spontaneous and improvisational aesthetic typically associated with Vlogs. He meticulously sources inspiration from fellow Vloggers, curates product-centric scripts, orchestrates the settings, and conducts multiple rehearsals and takes, exhibiting an unwavering commitment to accurately presenting his merchandise to his viewers. On his Douyin profile, Feng assumes a multifaceted identity – hostel proprietor, PADI certified diver, certified paraglider, and seasoned traveller who has embarked on a 150-day journey through Sichuan, Tibet, Nepal, and India. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted Feng's hostel business in Nepal, necessitating his return to China. As of my last visit to his Douyin profile (accessed on 12 April 2021), he had added an additional identity to his persona – a certified Nepali authentic singing bowl therapist, with recent video content predominantly featuring introductions to the singing bowl, juxtaposed against the stunning backdrop of the Potala Palace in Lhasa.

Figure 30 producing a Vlog (my photo, 2029)

For numerous Chinese Vloggers, Nepal merely functions as a node within their extensive transnational Vlogging networks. These networks predominantly encompass regions globally, with a notable focus on areas in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, often categorised as underdeveloped and uncivilised. The Vlogging experiences curated within these territories often mirror Feng's monetisation strategy, leveraging Vlogs to generate web traffic and promote commercial products, thereby augmenting their revenue streams.

An example of such a Vlogger is Susu, a young Chinese woman in her early thirties. Post middle school, she was dissuaded from pursuing further education. Prior to 2018, she owned and operated a small retail outlet in her hometown, which was unfortunately forced to close due to potential fire hazards. Following this setback, Susu initiated her nomadic existence (termed '*piao*' in the personal interview, 2021) within Africa. The primary impetus for creating Vlogs about her international experiences, she candidly admits, was financial gain. Her African odyssey commenced in Rwanda and subsequently progressed to Tanzania, where she initially intended to document the indigenous tribes of Arusha; this endeavour, however, was thwarted due to undisclosed personal reasons. Susu's early Vlogs centred predominantly around her personal experiences. Conversely, her recent digital narratives primarily feature young Africans engaging in activities such as dancing, cooking, and playing games. These individuals, employed as cleaners or "shooting partners", as per Susu's terminology, often present their performances under the guise of cultural and customary introductions to Africa.

Susu self-identifies as a travelling entrepreneur. Her African Vlogs primarily serve as promotional material for her digital marketplace selling agricultural products within China. According to Susu, her revenue is derived from three primary sources: monetisation of web traffic, advertising profits, and product sales through online streaming. A significant portion of this income is allocated towards offsetting her international travel expenses. However, due to the travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, her Vlogging material was restricted, necessitating the re-upload of previous Vlogs. This content recycling strategy was met with viewer discontent, manifesting as demands for novel content in the comment sections. Consequently, under this mounting pressure, Susu shifted her Vlogging base from Tanzania to Pakistan during the pandemic.

Susu, XLTW, and Feng share a commonality in their overlapping transnational mobility networks and their overarching objectives. Originating from unprivileged or marginalised positions within China, they occupy liminal spaces, strategically distanced from both urban and rural areas. They are disassociated from their social environments within their marginalised hometowns, yet insufficiently integrated within the metropolises in which they operate (Qin, 2019). In essence, they resemble modern nomads, perpetually shifting between locations, unable to cultivate a sense of belonging. Additionally, stereotyped as small-town youth (Ch. *xiao zhen qing nian*), they are objectified and alienated, serving as consumption fodder for their urban counterparts. The dominant narratives from urban centres often eclipse their efforts to document their small-town lives, thereby relegating them to objects of entertainment (Xu and Wang, 2021). The pressure to succeed is further amplified by the pervasiveness of success narratives permeating every facet of life, the most significant of which is the collective celebration of China's development. This development narrative, interwoven with innumerable personal success stories, presents a dichotomy for these Vloggers: they are caught in the interstice between their current reality and the promised affluence of an imminent future. The Chinese state's assurance of escalating prosperity casts a shadow of uncertainty – where exactly do these individuals fit within this envisaged narrative of progress?

Their transnational mobility, to a significant extent, can be construed as a reaction to and an outcome compelled by their domestic immobility. Vlogging serves as one of several strategies adopted to sustain their nomadic lifestyle abroad. Although physical mobilisation and the documentation of these bodily movements through Vlogs are recognised as their resolution to the constraints of immobility, their final destination remains undetermined. For many Vloggers,

the selection of their travel destination is less informed by a thorough comprehension of the host society's appeal and more likely dictated by a nebulous conception of convenience. XLTW, when asked how he selects his travel destinations, responded,

> "I have only visited Kenya in Africa. My travel destinations thus far are primarily in Southeast and South Asia... I initially chose Southeast Asian countries because of their proximity to China, the relatively lower travel expenses, and the substantial Chinese tourist presence, or to put it another way, the stronger Chinese influence in these countries. Given my limited English proficiency and lack of experience travelling in other countries, it was relatively convenient for me to travel to these locations" (personal interview, 2021).

XLTW's response reveals that convenience, for him, is a multifaceted concept encompassing elements such as geographic distance, travel expense, language barriers, and critically, Chinese influence. Furthermore, it indicates that his evaluation of convenience is more influenced by China's relations with potential destinations rather than the destinations' inherent qualities. He also sheds light on how he perceives the tangible manifestations of China's influence on the ground, most notably the prominence of Chinese tourism. This prominence provides an integrated system of various facilities and resources, such as the prevalence of the Chinese language, that not only facilitate their mobility but also enhance their experience, engendering a sense of ease, comfort, and even privilege. XLTW's perspective mirrors those of many of my informants who prefer Nepal due to its reputation for being China-friendly, economical, and well-equipped with comprehensive, Chinese-oriented tourist facilities.

Consequently, these transnational Vlogging trajectories, which take on the form of tourism, are sanctioned by the state and sustained by capital. The roles of these two actors in this process are not distinctly demarcated. Previously, I have undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the concept of tourist flow, problematising it as fragmented, disjointed, grounded, and serving as a connection point in the globalisation process from below. The Chinese Vloggers analysed in this chapter aptly exemplify this notion. Riding the wave of Chinese tourism to Nepal, these Vloggers share numerous aspects of the routes and infrastructure of the tourist flow with typical tourists. However, their diverse backgrounds, motivations, capital possession, and connections with other routes or platforms contribute to the heterogeneous texture of this flow.

Conclusion

Based on the examination of online travelogues as alternative modes of knowledge in New Nepali Studies, this chapter extends the discussion to another, albeit 'darker', mode of knowledge - Vlogs of Nepal. These Vlogs are considered 'darker' compared to the online travelogues and films discussed in the preceding chapter due to the more prominent configuration of racism, discrimination, exploitation, and hierarchy. The main theme of these Vlogs is a universal, linear concept of development and modernity, thereby framing them as a yardstick of a uniformly perceived global phenomenon, overlooking historical and geographic variations on the ground.

In this chapter, I argue that, while these Vlogs claim to capture the micro-level snapshots of Nepali society, they inadvertently displace Nepal by situating it within a single, universal narrative of human civilisational evolution. A primary narrative thread involves comparing Nepal and China in terms of development. This comparison manifests through various indicators, such as commodity prices, infrastructure, environment, security, and human virtues, typically demonstrated within empirical, everyday contexts. While the direct comparison usually involves only Nepal and China, this chapter, aligning with the thesis's overarching argument, suggests the West/North's shadowy, albeit potent, presence. This seemingly neutral, yet pervasive, presence directs the narrative of these Vlogs and encourages their creation and dissemination. These Chinese Vloggers aim to affirm their modern, global identities by portraying an unmodern Nepal.

The exploration of these Vloggers' motivations shifts this chapter's focus from homogeneous moral criticism towards a multimodal stance that critically examines the processes through which various experiences amalgamate to form alternative knowledge. The genesis of these Vlogs is a process wherein vloggers not only encapsulate their transnational daily experiences into a specific media form but also strive for physical and social mobilisation. The relationship between these two trajectory types—production and dissemination of knowledge and the actions and practices of knowledge creators/distributors—is complex and contested.

Equally contested is the relationship between mobility and immobility. While constant movement may define the status of many Vloggers, this condition includes numerous stationary

moments during which they partake in the on-ground processes of low-end globalisation. Mobility is underpinned by the resources they gather on-site, incorporating a vast array of material and socio-cultural elements. For instance, Vloggers require food and accommodations for rest and recuperation. They also need to spend time in local settings to establish social connections, collect Vlogging materials, and live life holistically. These on-ground moments are as significant, if not more, for Vloggers and other travellers in cultivating their identities beyond their roles as Vloggers. Later sections of this thesis will primarily examine these mobility-related imprints in Nepal.

The subsequent chapter will continue its focus on themes of representation/configuration. Through a gendered lens, it will examine a specific configuration - the portrayal of the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Ms. Hou Yanqi. It will scrutinise diverse gendered depictions of Ms. Hou, particularly those portraying her as a sexually attractive Chinese tourist, and analyse how these representations have been embraced, rejected, and adapted by various forces. The chapter will contemplate how local Nepalis articulate their range of attitudes towards the Chinese presence in Nepal, as exemplified by Chinese tourism, through these visual portrayals.

Chapter Six Configuring a Woman, Controlling Chinese Presence[10]

> "Social media is an excellent platform to earn goodwill at the public level and foreign ambassadors here are using it effectively to gain popularity…These platforms have in many ways changed the traditional ways of diplomacy." (Rai, 2020)

> "But we disagree with the disparagement and threats issued by naming any particular editor. We condemn such an act. We would also like to remind the embassy that it breached diplomatic decorum in doing so."
> (Post Report, 2020)

The excerpts above revolve around the same figure, the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi[11]. Her various gendered visual presentations deviate from the stereotypical image of Communist diplomats from the PRC. Rather than the expected poker-faced, media-shy, and confrontational approach, Ambassador Hou fostered a persona of openness and ease as a female ambassador. Since her arrival in Nepal, she leveraged her Twitter account to engage with the public, sharing embassy-related news and personal experiences such as her travels in Nepal and dumpling-making sessions at the embassy. These activities accentuated her feminine qualities of grace, beauty, softness, and versatility and allowed her to blend her gendered identity with the traditionally masculinised roles of a diplomat.

Building upon the discussion from the previous two chapters, this chapter will delve further into the intersection of representation and power within the Nepal-China contact zone. The conversation will extend beyond the realm of tourism to incorporate another sector of the contact zone, that of diplomacy. The nexus between these two realms revolves around a unique figure: a Chinese female tourist who is also a diplomat – the previous Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi. This chapter will analyse Ambassador Hou's various gendered visual representations in her diplomatic work, including those where she is depicted as a feminised Chinese tourist.

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[10] A modified version of this chapter has been submitted for inclusion in an edited book due to be published by Palgrave.

[11] It is worth noting that the primary subject of this chapter, Ms. Hou Yanqi, served in her ambassadorial role at the Chinese embassy in Nepal from 2018 to 2022. The main body of this chapter was composed during her tenure.

I previously noted that when tourists attempt to depict their destinations, they inadvertently project their own image. By producing and sharing travelogues and Vlogs, the actors discussed in previous chapters are, to varying degrees, also constructing, affirming, and negotiating their own identities. Therefore, these visible and invisible representations of tourists function as an integral component of identity formation within the contact zone. These representations can transcend various domains, such as tourism and diplomacy, allowing the same set of representations to shape different roles across domains. As will be demonstrated, Ambassador Hou, by portraying herself as an appealing female Chinese tourist, actively challenged the traditionally masculinised construct of a diplomat. Given her specific role, her representations unavoidably overlap with those of the state that appointed her. Therefore, any attempt to represent and construct her image will inevitably lead back to the state itself.

Moreover, while the previous two chapters emphasised the hegemonic power of Chinese actors representing Nepal in the contact zone, this chapter shifts the focus to the host society's mutual gaze (Maoz, 2006) on Chinese tourism and the broader Chinese presence. Contrary to the theorisation of 'pure', 'mobile' and 'traceless' Chinese tourist flows, Chinese tourism, being partially embedded within the host society, has left significant, observable, and interactive imprints. As such, one trace of these imprints is the construction of tourist representation, which also includes the counter gazes of local people. This constitutes a platform where the host society's power to resist, negotiate, and challenge can be exercised. Several events that transpired in the contact zone from late 2019 to early 2020, centred on the various representations of Ambassador Hou and the state she represents, and offered transnational actors opportunities to configure China and the Nepal-China relationship, ultimately adjusting the power dynamics of the contact zone. Through an analysis of these events and the representations they spotlighted, I reveal how Nepal attempted to negotiate and challenge the asymmetrical power structures of the contact zone by either embracing and rejecting specific representations of Chinese presence or directly (re)producing particular representations.

Furthermore, this chapter will incorporate gender perspectives into the discussion, as gender, sex, and sexuality form the core of understanding the hierarchical power structures within the contact zone. However, it is important to note that the hierarchical arrangement of gender, sexualised bodies, diplomacy, and state relations is not natural but constructed. Thus, the very act of configuring specific powers can also be harnessed by other actors to assert their own

power. For instance, while Ambassador Hou attempted to represent herself as an appealing female Chinese tourist to temper the hard edges of the masculinised image of the Chinese presence in Nepal, these same representations can be used by many Nepalis to amplify their own masculinities. To comprehend how this performance can be enacted and reversed, we first need to understand the mechanics of articulating gender, sexuality, diplomacy, and state relations within the Nepal-China contact zone.

Gender, Figuration, Diplomacy, and State Relations in the Nepal-China Contact Zone

This chapter commences with the theoretical inspiration provided by Stuart Hall's (1985: 113-114) conception of articulation. Hall postulates that articulation is "neither a constant nor an inevitable linkage, but rather a connection which necessitates specific conditions for its manifestation." In the specific context of the Nepal-China contact zone, and arguably in various other situations, the notion of a gendered figuration of diplomacy and state relations is an unstable aggregation of multiple links. These links span gender, sexuality, race, state, figure, and power, and their existence and nature are contingent upon historical, local, individual, and collective factors.

Gender is understood as a social structure that encapsulates distinct relationships with bodies, and includes a set of practices that integrate reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes (Connell, 2009). Importantly, these reproductive distinctions are not innate but are manufactured through the translation and classification of corporeal bodies into sexual categories. As expounded by Butler (1999), gender is not merely the cultural interpretation of sex. Rather, it is the discursive or cultural means by which 'sexed nature' is produced and posited as 'prediscursive', existing prior to culture and manifesting as a politically neutral surface upon which culture operates. Consequently, gender is construed from its associations with sexualised bodies, the characteristics of which are contingent upon specific spatial-temporal conditions.

Masculinity and femininity are similarly socially articulated and manifested through a complex array of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro-political activities that characterise certain pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures' (West and Zimmerman, 1987). These constructs are not essential categories rooted in biological differences or traits. Rather, they vary across diverse societies and historical periods, with the conditions that

structure the links transforming. Masculinity and femininity are mutually dependent, constructed in contrast to each other (Towns, 2020). The division between femininity and masculinity appears binary and static, as it is understood that a person, attribute, or behaviour can only be perceived as masculine or feminine. Thus, gender, masculinity, and femininity are socially constructed categories produced and practised through particular links that are contextually and temporarily contingent.

The question then arises - who delineates the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and through what processes, and with what power were masculinity and femininity created in nations such as China and Nepal? Many scholars (Hinsch, 2013; Lamichhane, 2022; Uprety, 2017) have elucidated how masculinity and femininity have been conceptualised diversely in China and Nepal throughout history. There is a multifaceted transcultural process bridging the modern notions of masculinity and femininity in Nepal and China and their various historical forms, which enabled European colonial powers to gender these regions. In non-European areas, gender has been inextricably linked with other constructed concepts such as race, nation, and state through this very process. This process is fundamentally hierarchical, with whiteness and masculinity occupying the apex, followed by white femininity deemed superior to coloured masculinity. Coloured femininity lies at the pyramid's base. The powers that have sculpted this pyramidal structure have also forged the links between masculinity and superiority, and femininity and inferiority. Thus, females and feminised races and nations have been debased through violence. The colonial gender system has diminished their participation "from their ubiquitous involvement in ritual, decision-making, economics; to forced sexual engagement with white colonisers, to such deep labour exploitation that individuals often succumbed whilst working" (Lugones, 2008: 16).

However, the colonial influence that structured gender, race, and nation persists in its robust, enduring, and nuanced legacy, such that the colonisers' languages of masculinity and femininity have been assimilated into the languages and worldviews of individuals from former colonies. In the wake of the colonisers' retreat, as people from these former colonies endeavoured to systematise their own culture, history, economy, society, and relations with others, they found themselves largely ensnared by norms and regulations embedded in European contexts, rather than originating from their own territories. This coloniality, which equates the articulation of masculinity and/or femininity with specific individuals, objects, and actions, i.e., masculinisation and/or feminisation, is explicitly exemplified in Nepal and China's

collaborative endeavours to forge a shared history as a means to construct post-colonial solidarity.

The fundamental configurations of the contact zone's conventional primary actors, the Nepali and Chinese nation-states, are predominantly masculinised. This is because they largely hinge upon the ingrained and hegemonic relationships among the modern man, masculinity, and modern states, as metaphorised by Richard Ashley's concept of "statecraft as mancraft". As Weber (2016: 17) asserts, it is impossible to comprehend the emergence of modern sovereign states and international orders without understanding how a specific version of the "sovereign man" is inscribed as the fundamental basis of a sovereign state and a specific ordering of international relations. In other words, men or masculinised bodies are construed as the primary sovereign actors of modern states. They not only engage in various political systems of modern states but also employ masculinities to represent and legitimise this connection and process.

Diplomacy and diplomats, as embodiments of masculinised nation-states, incorporate masculinities. If diplomacy is considered "a mechanism designed to establish and maintain networks and relationships among traditional and new actors in the pursuit of shared interdependent goals" (Hart and Siniver, 2021: 164), then, as elucidated in the first chapter, the shared history fashioned by Nepal and China since the 1950s can be seen as a history of diplomacy. This history pivots around relationship establishment and maintenance executed by a select group of elite figures, predominantly male, including Buddhist monks, military generals, and artists. By confining these figures' trajectories within the national political and geographical boundaries and widely circulating them on various diplomatic occasions, the narrative of modern Nepali and Chinese states not only subsumes and de-contextualises a diverse range of historical movements for modern nation-building but also naturalises and reinforces the association between masculinity and diplomacy, which are imbricated in masculinised bodies. This narrative repeats a prototypical storytelling model in which lone-wolf men venture into unknown territories and eventually return triumphant and glorious, having overcome numerous adversities. In this constructed history, the right and duty of diplomacy, as a "mediation between estranged individuals, groups or entities" (Derian, 2009: 10), are conferred exclusively to men, who are portrayed as sufficiently courageous and resolved to explore the empire's frontiers. Masculinisation functions to legitimise these male adventurers' explorations, a link which is deeply rooted in European colonial norms rather than local traditions. For instance, as previously discussed, the celebration of male Chinese monks

as a pivotal historical link between Nepal and China only emerged recently, in stark contrast to their work being disparaged by traditional Confucian scholars of their time as superstitious and unreliable, rather than valiant and glorious.

As previously articulated, the processes of constructing and sustaining femininity and masculinity are fundamentally interdependent. Therefore, the historical masculinisation of diplomacy and diplomats between Nepal and China simultaneously marginalises women and femininity from diplomatic frontiers. Within this meticulously constructed narrative, men's explorations and adventures are depicted as autonomous actions, motivated by the overarching objectives of state missions and religious development. Conversely, women, when mentioned as envoys in this diplomatic narrative, are often portrayed as 'victims' of coerced marriages, sometimes even amid explicit military threats. The conspicuous absence of female actors' participation in the project of inscribing a diplomatic history between Nepal and China, which encompasses various sub-projects spanning economy, politics, diplomacy, history, art, and literature, aimed at crafting post-colonial solidarity between two modern states, reverberates with Chadya's contention (2003: 154) that "nationalism accomplished its objectives at the expense of women's subordination." It epitomises the male-dominated heterosexual logic that underpins the construction and ordering of modern states, which habitually marginalises women, feminised individuals, and other non-masculinised bodies.

The preceding analysis of the masculinisation of historical diplomacy and diplomats between Nepal and China as a modern construction is consonant with Enloe's (2014) and Neumann's (2008) conclusion that diplomats in Western contexts are also highly masculinised, distancing themselves from femininity. It also concurs with the existing scholarship that illuminates how diplomacy is predominantly male-dominated throughout its history (McCarthy, 2014; McCarthy and Southern, 2017; Pohlig, 2021; Sluga and James, 2015; Wood, 2015), its established cultures (Allen, 2019; Minarova-Banjac, 2018), networks (Niklasson, 2020), representational and discursive configurations (Towns, 2020), and forms of representation and participation in various organisations (Towns and Niklasson, 2017). Complications such as marriage bans, discrimination (Aggestam and Towns, 2019; Barrington, 2017), and bureaucratic and structural marginalisation of women (Conley Tyler et al., 2014) further contribute to the gendered division of labour in diplomacy (Dobson, 2012), which is dominated by norms of masculinity. Scholars such as Kreft et al. (2022) caution that these gendered

patterns are not diminishing, and there is a potential weakening of the pressure for states to prioritise political representation for women (Jacob et al., 2021).

To a considerable extent, the state of diplomacy between Nepal and China does not deviate from the academic findings derived from other parts of the world. It is traditionally and institutionally male-dominated. Nepal and China established an official diplomatic relationship in 1955. The first cohort of Chinese ambassadors to Nepal (1955-1967) consisted entirely of male high-ranking members of the Chinese Communist Party who had experience in military service. Moreover, among the twenty-one diplomatic officers who have been assigned to ambassadorial positions in the Chinese embassy in Nepal since then, only two are women. These include Ambassador Hou Yanqi and her predecessor Ambassador Yu Hong (2016-2018). Thus far, none of the Nepali ambassadors to China have been women. Outside the diplomatic domain, other activities between Nepal and China are also dominated by men. Until recently, the majority of activities between the two states were driven and sustained by economic and state security factors, and were therefore state-centric (Yubaraj, 2018), a setting in which women's experiences and voices are not fully expressed (Manchanda, 2001). State-sponsored male actors, such as experts, technicians, builders, and monks, have been the most active participants, while women have only been present as translators, secretaries, and wives in a handful of cases.

Furthermore, the symbolic and rhetorical representation of the relationship between the modern Nepali and Chinese states is also traditionally masculinised. Mount Everest, the world's highest peak, intersects the borders of both states. Since the early days when Nepal and China sought to establish diplomatic relations, Mount Everest has not only become a significant security concern for both states but has also been utilised as an influential symbol to imbue masculinised traits onto the definition of the two states' relationship, such as being likened to a mountain in terms of stability and defensibility.

While acknowledging these points, it is logical that the masculinisation of diplomacy, as an articulation of masculinity with specific practices, is interwoven with unnecessary, conditional, and unstable links. The temporality and conditionality of the masculinisation of diplomacy give rise to a kind of figuration that is "conditioned by the specificities of historical, political, and economic processes embedded in that context" (Pereira, 2017: 18). Feminist theorising has been instrumental in developing the concept of figuration, which is largely attributed to

feminist scholars Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti. Haraway (2018; 2004) emphasises the imaginary and materialist essences of figurations, grounding them in history and narratives. Weber (2015: 15) explains that Haraway's understanding of figuration involves "distillations of shared meanings in forms or images that do not (mis)represent the world, for to do so implies the world as a signified preexists them." Braidotti (2011: 2), on the other hand, offers a slightly different interpretation of the concept, defining figurations as "materialistic mappings of situated, embedded, and embodied social positions." Reading Haraway and Braidotti together reminds us of figurations as material-discursive entities, as Thiele (2021: 232) notes that "figurations are material-semiotic wor(l)dings... about the creation of different relations between words and things - between wording and worlding." Therefore, the concept of figuration can serve as a powerful tool for challenging existing power structures and envisioning new possibilities for social-political and cultural structures. It has the potential to liberate individuals from restrictive gender roles and other oppressive social constructs.

Within the domain of International Relations, Cynthia Weber (2015) and Anna Towns (2020) have significantly contributed to the theorisation of figuration as a method of re-examining international politics and diplomacy. Both scholars primarily focus on the "shifting schemes of representation" (Towns, 2020: 581) of states, diplomacy, and diplomats. Weber (2015: 19) urges IR scholars to widen their focus to include multiple figures, suggesting that figuration should not be constrained to binary categorisation with either/or relations. Instead, she advocates for the use of Queer IR methods, which propose that a subject is simultaneously one thing and another (plural, perverse) while also being one thing or another (singular, normal). Informed by Weber's conceptualisation, Towns (2020: 591) complicates the male-scripted figurations of diplomacy in the US context, arguing that "'the diplomat' rarely seems to simultaneously be configured as man and woman, masculine and feminine in the same text. Instead, the diplomat shifts form between texts, alternating between a variety of masculinised or feminised figures, whether male or female." In this way, Towns demonstrates the potential of figuration to challenge the gendered norms and binaries that have historically characterised the study of diplomacy and international politics.

The queerness, transmutability, and transformability of figurations have provided a significant impetus for the investigation undertaken in this chapter. As a female diplomat representing a powerful nation in a comparatively vulnerable one, Ambassador Hou Yanqi's figurations are queer, if we understand queerness as that which is "at odds with the normal...identity without

an essence" (Halperin, 1995: 62). This queerness is multifaceted, and her figurations span multiple dimensions. For instance, her female gender, as discussed earlier, is decoupled from the masculinised figure of a diplomat, as seen in the surprised and doubtful reactions that often surface when people learn that the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal is a woman. Moreover, as I will illustrate soon, the figures of masculinised and feminised diplomats can coexist within the same sexualised body, thereby enhancing her diplomatic flexibility and adaptability. Despite people's scepticism, Ambassador Hou's feminised body does not necessarily hinder her effectiveness in performing masculinised duties. For Ambassador Hou Yanqi, showcasing her 'feminine' traits, such as presenting herself as an innocent female tourist, does not make her 'soft' and 'weak.' Instead, it enables her to promote Chinese tourism in Nepal as a "soft," yet crucial, sphere of interaction between the two states. Nonetheless, given that feminine and masculine traits can be fluidly transferred even within the same body, Ambassador Hou can 'man up' and adopt masculine traits when she perceives the need to assertively defend China's patriarchal image in Nepal. When she does so, her masculine aggressive figure is amplified, as it defies people's expectations of femininity from her.

A queer perspective provides a valuable means to explore the multi-faceted, often contradictory, and shifting figurations of Ambassador Hou. This approach extends beyond understanding queerness simply as anti-normative and encompasses its dialectical (Hendriks, 2021) and disruptive potential (Murtagh, 2013). Such a view allows us to reconceptualise queer as a placeholder (Luther and Loh, 2019: 15) that facilitates deconstruction and reconstruction, emphasising fluidity and context specificity. Queerness can thus be appropriated and re-fashioned by different actors to suit their needs effectively (Rao, 2020: 27). The case at hand shows how Ambassador Hou's gendered figurations are embedded and embodied within the asymmetrical power relations of the contact zone. Therefore, Nepali and Indian actors also play a part in the gendering process as a strategy to alter and disrupt the regional power relations, effectively "queering" them.

The queered and shifting figurations of Ambassador Hou Yanqi indicate that any examination of this topic must not only concentrate on the scheme of representations but also take into account the gendering process and the forces that form, sustain, and disrupt this process. This approach contributes methodologically to previous discussions led by Weber and Towns. It proposes that diplomacy, as a complex and significant field, has its own social life, stakes, struggles, and capital, and is interconnected with other fields (Standfield, 2020), such as

tourism and private investment. Therefore, bottom-up methods can be utilised to investigate how state relations, intricately tied to "ground-level diplomacy, historical relations, cultural prejudices and stereotypes, and the effects of changing state policies and relations" (Chan, 2013: 4), are gendered or queered.

Material Collection

The examination of gendered figurations of the Chinese ambassador in Nepal was not initially an intended part of the project. Nevertheless, upon my arrival in Kathmandu, Ambassador Hou quickly captivated my personal and academic interests. Like many other individuals of interest, my understanding of her was indirect, gleaned through a combination of second-hand accounts, social media, news articles, and direct observations. Twitter was particularly crucial, serving as the main platform where symbolic representations of Ambassador Hou were directly relayed to others, and where exchanges of comments, critiques, posts, ideas, and emotions occurred (though I rarely observed her interacting directly with ordinary netizens on Twitter). I followed her Twitter account (@PRCAmbNepal)[12] from October 2019 and regularly monitored her posts since then. Beyond Twitter, I gathered materials from mainstream Nepali newspapers such as *The Kathmandu Post*, *The Himalayan Times*, *Kantipur Daily*, and *Annapurna Post*, with a particular emphasis on Ambassador Hou's appearances, China, and Nepal-China relations. Relevant materials were also collected from on-site participation and observations at various events, such as routine daily interactions, embassy banquets, and pro-China public gatherings organised by certain Nepali political parties.

The Figuration of a Feminised Chinese Tourist

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[12] Somehow, after she retired from the position of Chinese Ambassador in Nepal, MS Hou Yanqi deleted all her Twitter posts, and this account is now managed by her successor and changed to his name.

Figure 31 Video clip from Ambassador Hou's Twitter (Hou, 2020)

"In a context where diplomats hailing from the capitals of declining powers are expected to frequent art galleries, partake in cocktail events, utter platitudes, and issue trivial statements about the 'long and friendly relations between our two countries'" (Lal, 2023), the approach of Ambassador Hou Yanqi to her diplomatic duties came across as innovative and genuine, and sometimes even somewhat unorthodox. During the 2020 Dashain festival, a significant celebratory event in Nepal, she posted a self-made music video on her Twitter account. In this video, she and her female colleagues perform *Resham Firiri*, one of the most beloved folk songs in Nepal.

In the video, Ambassador Hou Yanqi occupies a natural expanse of sprawling grasslands and trees, singing directly into the camera. She is filmed from the chest up, centred in a close-up view. The video affords a clear depiction of Ambassador Hou, replete with details and embellishments that underscore her femininity. She dons a full-length, dark-coloured dress, cinched at the waist with a slim belt, thereby accentuating her body's curves. A long, red scarf draped around her shoulders complements the lines drawn by her dress and belt. Moreover, she sports a large, Y-shaped necklace comprising some pearls. In the video, her feminised figure is in motion, slightly swaying with her hands lightly waving in rhythm with the song.

The feminisation of Ambassador Hou's image is not an indiscriminate process. Certain forms of femininity are deemed more apt than others, as evident in the music video where her

feminised figure is portrayed via elegant and tasteful attire and accessories, rather than provocative attire often downplayed in a female diplomat's representation. This selective portrayal of femininity echoes an existing hierarchical structure, as observed in the broader context of hegemonic relations (Budgeon, 2014). By aligning with the domain of diplomacy, femininities are renegotiated and redefined, leading to a shifting emphasis on different forms of femininity that are suitable to represent Ambassador Hou.

Further, the hierarchy of feminisation in the video correlates with social statuses, including class, profession, and bureaucratic rank. While Ambassador Hou claims the spotlight, her female colleagues only appear intermittently as part of a surrounding choir, and their relatively modest attire and accessories are not given prominence as the camera's focus stays on Ambassador Hou. This suggests that the association of femininity with specific domains, like diplomacy, perpetuates the existing hierarchies of social status.

The music video also incorporates numerous Nepali tourist attractions, such as snow-capped mountains, temples, and the cheerful faces of locals. These images are interwoven with Ambassador Hou's feminised figure, illustrating the role of 'soft' power in diplomacy and its implementation via cultural symbols and practices to bolster diplomatic relations.

In sum, this music video serves to validate Ambassador Hou Yanqi's feminised and refined persona as a competent and multifaceted diplomat. The video employs a selective process of emphasising, contrasting, and remixing to construct and reinforce this image. Notably, the act of singing emerges as a significant marker of femininity, often side-lined in the male-dominated, serious diplomatic circles. Such 'soft' behaviours are usually relegated to other forms of diplomacy where women have a prominent presence (Ford, 2016). However, Ambassador Hou tactfully merges her dual identity as a diplomat and a woman to bridge these two diplomatic domains.

The underlying reasons for this gendered articulation's effectiveness and the objectives it serves merit examination. As posited, the answers to these questions are embedded in the video's fusion of Ambassador Hou's feminised persona, the Nepali tourist scenes, and the song *Resham Firiri*. Essentially, Ambassador Hou seeks to mitigate the harshness of geopolitical conflicts by feminising China's masculinised presence in Nepal within the tourist domain, a sphere of interaction that has proven to be the most active and mutually valued between the two countries.

Given the flourishing state of Chinese tourism in Nepal, as previously discussed, it is unsurprising that Ambassador Hou utilises this sector to bolster the positive relations between the two nations. In general, tourism has emerged as one of the most potent channels of interaction between Nepal and China in recent years, with its swift development benefiting other areas of cooperation between the two countries significantly (Yang, 2022).

Moreover, the method of delivering the intended message is subtle and carefully crafted. *Resham Firiri*, the song Ambassador Hou performs in the video, is one of the most beloved folk songs in Nepal. Although its origins remain somewhat unclear, it is believed that the song's creator, Buddhi Pariyar, composed it while journeying to attend a wedding in a village in Pokhara in the 1960s (Sharma, 2019). However, it did not gain renown until 1969, when the state-run radio, Radio Nepal, recorded and broadcast the song nationwide. Over the ensuing decades, *Resham Firiri*, along with other folk songs, transitioned from 'folk' to 'Nepali' under state patronage and achieved widespread popularity (Henderson, 2002; Stirr, 2018, 2012). Recently, international tourists have played a significant role in the song's popularisation. Its catchy tune and whimsical romantic lyrics have transformed it into an effective communication tool between foreign tourists and local tourism practitioners, particularly guides and drivers. To some extent, *Resham Firiri* has become a symbolic representation of Nepali tourism, akin to the renowned greeting word, namaste, enabling foreign tourists to quickly immerse themselves in Nepalese culture and satisfy their craving for exoticism.

Hence, in this video, Ambassador Hou's rendition of *Resham Firiri* serves as a strategic instrument to not only engage Nepali netizens through a shared popular culture but also to transfer her femininity and feminised figure to the tourist sector. In doing so, she endeavours to dilute the masculinised tourist gaze (Urry, 2011). She embodies and signifies and she empowers local Nepalis, particularly men, by presenting her sexualised body for their scrutiny. Numerous scholars have explored the tourism industry as a diverse arena where anticipated patriarchal tourist gazes are continuously observed, disputed, and challenged, and where local actors consciously or inadvertently resist feminising tourist configurations (Hansen, 2021; Jacobs, 2009; Jordan and Aitchison, 2008). In the Nepali context, for instance, Adams (1996) has demonstrated how Sherpa people, renowned for assisting Western mountaineers in scaling lofty peaks, actively perform masculinity and femininity simultaneously to meet their Western patrons' expectations of an authentic Sherpa people, thereby securing various forms of patronage. Yamaga (2007), through an exploration of the locally popular phrase "Chinese food,

American money, Japanese wife," suggests that some young Nepali men fantasise about modernisation and globalisation by projecting their erotic fantasies onto Japanese women. However, they are frustrated by the reduction in their masculinity due to the disparity in material development between Nepal and Japan. This music video suggests that Ambassador Hou possesses a comprehensive understanding of these complex power dynamics within Nepal's tourism sector. Thus, by presenting herself to local actors' masculine scrutiny and gaze, she is able to make them feel secure by subtly detaching herself from her masculinised image as a diplomat representing China's communist ideology and penetrating presence.

This video serves as one instance where Ambassador Hou presented herself as an ordinary Chinese woman. Accentuating the various forms of femininity that her physicality embodies was one of Ambassador Hou's most recurrent strategies on social media. Besides being perceived as a typical female Chinese tourist, she could also embody the role of a proficient housewife, as suggested by the following snapshot.

Figure 32 Picture from Ambassador Hou's Twitter (2) (Hou, 2019a)
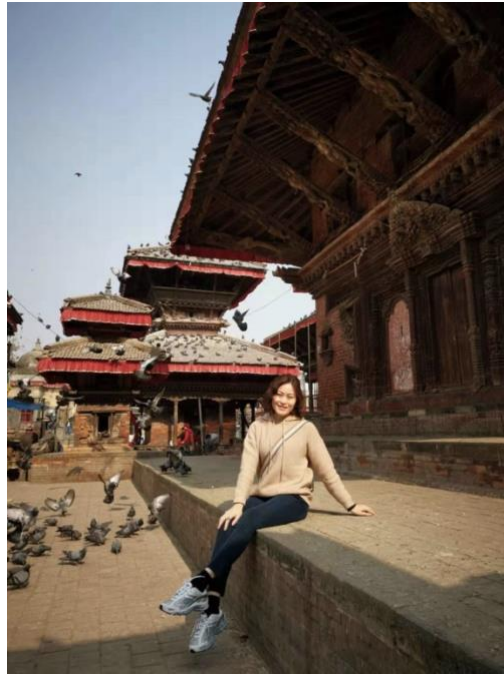
Figure 33 Picture from Ambassador Hou's Twitter (3) (Hou, 2019b)

Ambassador Hou Yanqi's initiatives to foster diplomacy via social media earned considerable acclaim and appreciation from Nepali internet users. Arguably, her most significant recognition from the Nepali populace derived from her Twitter posts on New Year's Eve of 2020. On 31st December, 2019, Ambassador Hou disseminated photographs of herself on Twitter to endorse Nepal's short-lived national campaign, Visit Nepal 2020. She expressed, "True beauty always profoundly touches the heart. Beautiful Nepal, with its history, diversity, and nature, deserves a visit. Wishing #VisitNepal2020 success!" Her post culminated in a wish for the campaign's triumph, written in the Nepali language, "2020 Nepal *bhramana varsa saphalatako subhakamana*!" She also tagged Nepal's Tourism Minister, Yogesh Bhattarai, who promptly shared Ambassador Hou's post while articulating his gratitude. A day later, Ambassador Hou posted another tweet extending her New Year's salutations to the Nepali people, accompanied by her touristic photographs. Her model-like images swiftly gained popularity on Nepali social media, eliciting hundreds of positive responses from Nepali internet users, a considerable number of whom extolled her model-like poses in the pictures.

Figure 34 Ambassador Hou's widely circulated tourist pictures (Hou, 2019c)

In comparison to Ambassador Hou's depiction in the previously discussed video, her portrayal in these sets of images is even more feminised, to the point where her intent to place herself under the spotlight of the male gaze is scarcely concealed. By occupying the focus of the camera, she prompts the question of what or who the "true beauty" she references in her post pertains to - herself or the Nepali tourist attraction she aimed to promote. Adorned in a long scarlet dress, a black scarf that alters its position around her body in different postures, and subtle makeup, Ambassador Hou permits the camera to capture her body, thus constructing her as an object of the male gaze. Rarely does she return the camera's gaze directly, and when she does, her counter-gaze is feminised as a sexual one imbued with seductive potential. The multiplicity of posted pictures further amplifies the male gaze in these images as they create camera movement, which "enacts the male gaze, panning up and down the woman's body - a fragmented body, and moving in for close-ups of various sections of the female body, especially the face. The camera constructs the object qua object" (Oliver, 2017: 452).

It is noteworthy that, as Ambassador Hou likely orchestrated the production of these pictures, the male gazes shaping her in these images originate not from others, but rather from herself. These male gazes hint at the hegemonic power wielded by masculine gazes in configuring feminised "true beauty." This power is so potent that it has been naturalised under the skin of numerous sexualised bodies and has become their sole language for representing the world.

However, this linguistic system of gendered arrangement is not universal but rather hierarchically varied. Access to this power is variably shared by hierarchically racialised and gendered individuals and collective forces, and these diversely racialised and gendered entities are variously configured within the system. Around the same time that Ambassador Hou posted her pictures, the American ambassador to Nepal, Mr Randy Berry, also employed similar promotional tactics on Twitter. However, in his images, Mr Berry stands on the ground or on top of a peak, gazing directly at the camera, or far away, or taking photographs himself.

Figure 35 The Mao-wearing-mask picture published by The Kathmandu Post

Contesting Chinese Masculinity in Nepal

On February 18, 2020, The Kathmandu Post reprinted an article under the headline, "China's Secrecy has Exacerbated the Coronavirus Crisis." (Daalder, 2020) This publication ignited substantial consternation amongst the majority of the Chinese community based in Nepal, particularly because it included the politically satirical image depicting Mao Zedong, as featured on the 100 RMB cash note, donning a mask. The Chinese population interpreted the article and the accompanying image as an affront to China's anti-pandemic endeavours and a disparagement of the nation's venerated leader. This sentiment was further exacerbated by a sense of betrayal from Nepal, a country significantly reliant on Chinese aid.

On the day the contentious article was published, the Chinese Embassy in Nepal promptly issued a denunciatory statement, reproaching the newspaper for its "deliberate smear on the efforts of the Chinese government and its citizens in the fight against the novel coronavirus, and for its severe criticism of the Chinese political system." The statement also implicated the newspaper's Editor-in-Chief, Anup Kaphle, of having persistent bias regarding China-related issues, labelling him a puppet of anti-China entities with doomed ulterior motives (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2020). The Chinese Embassy's statement, however, encountered an array of critical reactions not only from The Kathmandu Post, but also from multiple sectors in Nepal who decried the embassy and Ambassador Hou for infringing diplomatic norms and contravening the rights to freedom of speech and the press as guaranteed by the Nepali Constitution (N/A, 2020; Post Report, 2020). One editorial (N/A, 2020) cautioned that China's aid is not without strings attached and interpreted the Chinese embassy's statement as an admonishment against "biting the hand that feeds," originating from "an ostensibly amicable neighbour."

In retaliation, certain pro-China organisations and political factions in Nepal orchestrated a public rally in the heart of Kathmandu in an endeavour to rectify the tarnished images of China and Nepal-China relations. At the demonstration site, a quintessential portrait of Mao Zedong was displayed, accompanied by the national banners of both countries[13].

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[13] On the day of the rally, the majority of the Chinese participants were associated with a non-governmental organisation, predominantly constituted of long-term Chinese residents in Nepal. Preliminary internal discussions within this group sparked a discourse on the advisability of exhibiting Mao Zedong's portrait, given the potential diplomatic hazards it could instigate. Nonetheless, the ultimate verdict was issued by the leader of the organisation, a Chinese veteran, who perceived it as an imperative and assertive counter-response.

Figure 36 The Pro-China rally site (my photo, 2020)

Astute readers may discern from the previous account that the nexus of this multifaceted critique and defense orchestrated by various stakeholders is deeply entrenched in the prevailing and dominant interrelations between modern man, masculinity, and modern statecraft. This correlation elucidates why Mao Zedong's portrait has become the epicentre of these conflicts— it is, after all, an emblem of the "ultimate representation of male authority" (Williams, 2003: 105) within the contemporary Chinese state. Distorting this representation is tantamount to undermining the masculinities integral to modern China, which form the very bedrock of the state. Similarly, defending the portrait is akin to safeguarding these masculinities, and, by extension, the state itself. Thus, for the predominantly male Chinese community in Nepal, the discord incited by The Kathmandu Post and the associated concerns could be perceived as a masculinity crisis (Gao, 2022), posing both challenges and opportunities. Successfully navigating this crisis could facilitate a reaffirmation, and even an augmentation, of Chinese masculinities in Nepal.

The influence of masculinity on shaping the dynamics between Nepal and China can certainly be explored further. As per Weber's examination of modern international relations, these

dynamics are often characterised by a hierarchy of masculinities often framed as male kinship, such as brotherhood (Jun and Ramay, 2022; Konwer, 2018; Lai, 2020a, 2020b; Ramachandran, 2003). While attempting to project a sense of closeness and reciprocity, the inherent hierarchy in brotherhood-power relations advances a hegemonic process. In this context, elder brothers can dominate, control, and feminise the masculine subjectivities of younger brothers through individual or collective actions such as warfare, marriage, trade, pillage, and aid. Yet, this process is dynamic, and susceptible to contestation and subversion by the feminised 'younger brothers.'

In this regard, the relationship between China and Nepal can be contextualised within this framework of brotherhood-power relations. China, with its formidable economic and military prowess, is commonly viewed as the 'old brother,' while Nepal, by comparison, is deemed the 'younger brother,' considerably less powerful. The aid extended by China to Nepal could be perceived as a mechanism to assert dominance over Nepal and feminise its masculine subjectivity. However, this process is not unilateral, and Nepal can reciprocate and resist this feminisation through diverse means such as contesting China's actions or developing its own agency. Thus, the concept of masculinity is crucial for comprehending the power interplay between Nepal and China, as it moulds the relations and the opportunities for agency and resistance.

The KTP conflict, centred on state masculinities, can be perceived as an inevitable fallout of China's swiftly burgeoning influence in Nepal, forged by long-term, asymmetrical exchanges between the two nations across numerous fields, including aid. This expansion of China's influence has precipitated the imposition of Chinese masculinities onto Nepalese soil. These state masculinities are unevenly distributed among Chinese men and women in Nepal and are also racialised, with many individuals utilising them to hierarchically position Nepali men and women, as well as their own relationships with various local actors. This observation parallels the previously discussed Vlogs produced by Nepali Bruce Lee, wherein nearly every Chinese man is referred to as Big Brother, regardless of his actual age and social standing. While Song and Hird (2013: 6-7) have proposed that Chinese masculinities are "assemblages… composed of transnationally circulating images and practices, and locally situated identities, practices and locales," powerful Chinese actors have sought to transplant these masculinities from their original contexts onto Nepal without engaging in dialogue with local actors. This assertion is exemplified by the display of an authoritative portrait of Mao Zedong at the public gathering.

Furthermore, Nepal increasingly views China and its people as challenges that need to be managed (Koirala, 2020), even within the tourism sector. Less than a week before Ambassador Hou Yanqi posted her glamourous pictures on Twitter, the front pages of nearly all mainstream Nepali newspapers featured headlines reporting the arrest of 122 Chinese nationals in a single day for illicit activities such as money laundering and fraud (Karki, 2019). As revealed by the news sources (Dhungana, 2019a), all these Chinese nationals, majorly males, arrived in Nepal on tourist visas, much like the Vloggers discussed in the previous chapter. Around half of them even did not possess passports (Dhungana, 2019b). While, as detailed by my local informants and news reports, these individuals maintained a clandestine existence behind the high walls of extensive self-isolated compounds, they were also, to some extent, integrated into the Chinese communities based in Nepal. They required takeaway services from nearby Chinese restaurants, wandered the streets of Thamel where they found agents who could assist them with everyday mundane tasks, or simply sought entertainment. Based on available information, no one knew their exact origins. It was widely speculated that they were part of a larger transnational criminal network encompassing East, South, Southeast, and Middle Asia, with Nepal being a recent inclusion. Their pathway to Nepal, as implied above, is significantly facilitated by policies, transportation, infrastructure, and networks that regulate and sustain transnational tourist flows.

This also mirrors certain aspects of transnational Chinese masculinities that are moulded and maintained by the state and capital. However, these aggressive expressions of Chinese masculinity are increasingly perceived as a threat to Nepal's sovereignty and social security, and they could potentially compromise Nepal's relations with China across various domains. When local actors endeavour to contain, control, or subvert Chinese masculinities, they must confront the masculinised hierarchy that governs the relationship between the two nations. Consequently, their efforts to challenge Chinese masculinities tend to concentrate on undermining the masculinities of Chinese old brothers. This could involve tarnishing masculinised political figures and political systems or degrading the femininities of Chinese diplomats. This might elucidate why Ambassador Hou Yanqi felt compelled to proactively present her feminising persona for the male gaze of numerous local actors.

In the face of the masculinity crisis, Ambassador Hou Yanqi's female gender and femininities, anticipated to soften the asymmetrical power dynamics, appear fragile and vulnerable. As

inferred from the embassy's severe statement, she had to assume an impersonal, masculinised role of a diplomat in public response to the crisis. At times, her feminising body and femininity even became susceptible targets that were easily exploited. For example, social media, where Ambassador Hou attempted to project an image of softness, peace, and non-aggressiveness by subjecting herself to the gaze of local netizens, was exploited by some Nepali men as a platform to amplify their masculinity by consuming her femininity.

Figure 37 Indecent comments on Ambassador Hou's Twitter, assessed on 9 November, 2021

Furthermore, Ambassador Hou became a target in Nepal during a tumultuous period when the country was embroiled in territorial disputes with India. This prompted some regional actors to manipulate regional power relations for their advantage by exploiting Ambassador Hou's female gender. For instance, several Indian media outlets disseminated rumours that Ambassador Hou had ensnared KP Sharma Oli, Nepal's Prime Minister at the time, in a "honey-trap" (see Buehler et al., 2021). While Nepali media robustly denied such rumours, they nonetheless illustrate how Ambassador Hou has involuntarily pulled from her more secure role and had to endure aggressive and disrespectful scrutiny solely due to her gender and sex.

Conclusion

Chapters Three, Four, and Five collectively examine the complex and dialectical relationships of various paths of alternative knowledge-making, often overlooked in conventional Nepali Studies. These paths are intricately tied to the contemporary Chinese tourist flow to and beyond Nepal.

This thesis challenges the idea of flow as automatic, autonomous, and ungrounded. Instead, it proposes a critical perspective that views flow as conditioned, experienced, and situated. The flow created, shaped, and sustained by the tourism industry has opened new spaces, provided new infrastructures, and involved new agents that influence the paths of new knowledge. These paths, while dependent on the tourist flow, are not confined to it. As Ambassador Hou's feminising tourist social media performance suggests, these paths transgress, remix, and ground themselves in various non-tourist fields, such as diplomacy.

These paths are largely influenced by a binary, singular, and masculinising logic. However, this powerful logic cannot fully erase the complex, queer situations on the ground, as power is always contested and shifting. For example, the same representational schemes can become sites where different actors in the contact zone exchange ideas and negotiate asymmetrical power dynamics. This highlights the need for a decentralising and multimodal enquiry into the power dynamics of knowledge production within the contact zone.

Traces of Western colonialism are evident in every aspect of the Nepal-China contact zone, from the construction of Nepal as Shangri-La to the shaping of the sexual norms of the contact zone. Almost every representation circulated in this contact zone bears colonial undertones. However, as these globalising currents traverse the contact zone, they are grounded to some extent in the contact zone's context and localised by cultural practices and people's everyday experiences.

This thesis attempts to establish the connection between tourist flows and low-end globalisation, a resilient, grounded, 'informal,' and alternative form of transnational movement involving people, products, ideas, and capital. The relationship between tourist flows and low-end globalisation is not only complementary but also intertwined. The growth of tourism in the Nepal-China contact zone has created an environment that enables various forms of low-end

globalisation, while low-end globalisation, in turn, contributes to the expansion and complexity of the tourism industry.

The landscapes of low-end globalisation flows have been briefly touched upon in previous chapters. However, these outlines are far from comprehensive and rigorous enough to provide ethnographically identifiable local expressions of regional and global circulations of cultures. To explore this, we must turn our attention to everyday life contexts where power and cultural politics are pervasive.

In the next chapter, I will begin analysing these spaces and places in the contact zone. My attention will primarily be on mundane everyday contexts and ordinary people's practices within them. I aim to explore the role of non-state ordinary people in the contact zone. By examining the places they inhabit, interact with, and shape in their daily lives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Nepal-China contact zone and the ways in which power and cultural politics are enacted and experienced at the grassroots level. This perspective will provide valuable insights into the everyday realities and experiences of those who navigate and contribute to the evolving dynamics of the contact zone.

Chapter Seven Same Games in Different Rooms-Asymmetries and Power in Chinese Spatial Fix in Nepal

The task of unearthing the various aspects of significance for my dissertation, specifically pinpointing potential informants and fostering robust relationships with them, proved to be a formidable methodological conundrum during my field study. Intricately intertwined with this was the theoretical complexity, as my empirical exploration used to be grounded in the assumption of a homogenous and independent Chinese influence in Nepal. This presupposition impelled me the explore a Chinese demographic based in Nepal, deeply ingrained in the host society with distinct cultural and geographical demarcations. However, this initial approach was significantly impeded by the multifaceted and ever-changing nature of the Chinese presence in Nepal. As the study evolved, I became cognisant of the fact that my quest for compatriots in a foreign land only brought to light fleeting elements of a fluid entity, the majority of which remained in obscurity.

Researchers engaged in the study of contemporary Nepali society have documented analogous challenges. Mark Liechty (2010), while investigating middle-class culture in Kathmandu, articulated his vexation over the elusive nature of objective attributes that could define this city's middle-class demographic. He metaphorically portrays (Ibid: 9) class categories as "pointillistic paintings" in which "from a distance the picture is clear, but as one approaches a class group, its boundaries dissolve, and the distinguishing characteristics blur into a mélange of conflicting and contrasting details." Furthermore, Hindman (2013) underscored the dynamic nature of the expatriate community in Nepal while scrutinising their shifting experiences, necessitating the ceaseless construction and deconstruction of a myriad networks. Despite their diverse approaches, these scholars addressed these methodological and theoretical conundrums by spatially representing diversity and fluidity. This process does not aim to affix locations, but rather provide a framework to scrutinise the interaction dynamics among various actors, whose relationships are defined by asymmetric power structures under given circumstances. This analytical structure facilitates an understanding of how these interactions (re)construct spaces, bestow them with specific meanings, and convert them into distinct locales. In essence, it explores how these constructed spaces influence inhabitants' everyday experiences, thereby enabling the negotiation of their diverse motivations and agendas. This process, in turn, maintains, challenges, and (re)creates new asymmetries.

In this chapter, my methodology aligns with Liechty and Hindman, focusing on the study of Chinese space and places in Nepal. This spatial turn acknowledges a hitherto overlooked, yet critical facet of the discourse around the Nepal-China contact zone. It seems plausible that due to the transitory nature of most activities within the contact zone, many individuals engaged in this interaction conceptualise, comprehend, and organise their experiences with a temporal bias. Many Chinese individuals I interacted with in Nepal displayed an apparent disinterest in discussing geographical specificities. Unlike their meticulous delineation of time periods, their perception of places appeared coarse, generalised, and imprecise. Their detachment towards local spatial structures can be largely attributed to two interconnected factors. First, their perspective towards the host society, underpinned by a linear interpretation of development, which discounts Kathmandu's 'chaotic' urban layouts as backward and convoluted. This perceived lack of development and modernity in the host society demotes it as a subpar location for prolonged habitation. The second factor is their self-perception as transient entities – visitors, travellers, or temporary residents – which psychologically distances them from the local environment.

In addition to the psychological factors, the constrained shared spaces among many Chinese in Nepal, partially a by-product of their unanchored status, further foster a devalued perception of material space in the host society. As transient occupants within this contact zone, their self-declared 'spaces' in Nepal seldom surpass the confines of simple, undecorated, uniform rooms within hotels, hostels, rented apartments, or company compounds. These environments are transient passageways rather than permanent dwellings - they are sites of temporary transition from which they wish to depart if feasible. Given the rental, borrowed, or shared nature of these spaces, they are considered transient and provisional, warranting scant attention and emotional investment. Privacy, in such environments, is often a luxury. This prompts individuals to venture into public domains, frequenting cafes, restaurants, and shopping centres, ingeniously repurposing these spaces into multifunctional areas.

Despite this subjective oblivion, it does not genuinely emancipate people from their physical embeddedness within the host society. Irrespective of whether spaces are rented or owned, public or private, secure or risky, most individuals must navigate their daily lives within these various local spaces. Contrary to their belief, their 'brief' occupancy of these spaces is neither traceless, isolated, nor ineffective, but instead tangible, interactive, and consequential. Broadly speaking, their fleeting presence, or even swift passage through these spaces, contributes to the

negotiation, challenge, and redefinition of the localness of these 'local' spaces. Their transient occupation within these Nepali spaces fuels the trialectic interplay of "the material production, the discursive construction, and the scalar situation" (Linder, 2019), which are intertwined with dynamics at regional, national and global scales.

Within these trans-local spaces and places, various boundaries are identified and challenged. These boundaries are not solely defined by the tangible borders of physical spaces, such as the high cement walls of compounds or commercial signs displayed in Chinese. More significantly, they denote the fluctuating demarcations between the fluid concepts of Chineseness, Nepaliness, and globalisation.

Nevertheless, recognising the larger asymmetries that shape and sustain spaces provides limited insight into their relationship with concrete individual agents. People from varied backgrounds reside, work, socialise, trade, and seek leisure within the same spaces. Any binary classification into 'Chinese' and 'Nepalis', or any other groups delineated by a singular boundary, is a major oversimplification of spatial complexity. With individual's unique power dynamics within these larger asymmetries, the same spaces can symbolise and function differently for different individuals.

To conclude, the principal objective of this chapter is to critically examine the so-called Chinese spaces within Nepal. By deliberately 'pausing' the flows, I create a window of opportunity to delve deeply into the motivations, actions, and experiences of concrete agents. The aim is to illuminate the intricacies of asymmetries and power dynamics within the contact zone. These spaces, distinguished by their inherent multiplicity and dynamism, are concurrently shaped as intersections of the semiotic and the material. The theoretical framework guiding the analysis of these spaces takes inspiration from the seminal propositions delineated by (Massey, 2005: 9):

> "First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as
> constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to
> the intimately tiny… Second, that we understand space as the sphere
> of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity … Without space, no
> multiplicity; without multiplicity, no space … Third, that we recognise
> space as always under construction. Precisely because space on this

reading is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made… Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far."

My analysis embarks upon a journey to deconstruct the monolithic and hegemonic understanding of the most prominent Chinese spatial manifestation in Nepal, typically referred to as Chinatown.

Is there a Chinatown in Kathmandu? -Spatialising Chinese presence in Nepal, avoiding Chinatown stereotypes

"By contrast, at that time Nepal's cultural center, the Kathmandu Valley, was still paradigmatic of a way of life in which the concept of the sacral interacted with all important human activities and concerns, as it was the case during the Middle Ages in the West. For this reason even today, half a century after the opening of the Kathmandu Valley, it still provides many examples for the variety of meanings the term 'sacred place' may signify." (Sekler, 2001: 348)

Every place, to varying degrees, is associated with certain labels. Among these, Kathmandu is arguably a city that has been subjected to some of the most influential stereotyping. The fascination with the city's untarnished sacredness is not confined to tourism but extends to academic inquiry. Numerous studies have examined the spatial dynamics of the Kathmandu Valley, with a common theme being the tension between limited spatial resources and increasingly diverse spatial usage. This tension arises from the ongoing struggle between tradition and modernity, circling around the question of who has access to and control over space. This ongoing debate frames the creation of 'new' spaces as a process that comes at the expense of 'old' spaces, which are progressively squeezed and diminished. Concerns abound that the city's — and indeed, the country's — sacred spaces may be encroached upon by homogenous, industrialised modern spaces, which would inevitably lead to cultural degradation and a deterioration of the associated lifestyle (Rai, 2008, p. 2; Sekler, 2001; Shrestha and Shrestha, 2009; Shrestha, 2015).

Against the broader backdrop of the battle between tradition and modernity/development, the landscapes of Kathmandu and Nepal are often viewed as mosaics of ethnic spaces (Giampaoli, 2008; Subedi, 2010) heavily intertwined with issues of identity. A significant volume of research has focused on public space within the city (Chitrakar, 2015; Ranjitkar, 2000; Sengupta, 2017; Shrestha, 2015), examining the ways in which public spaces are reinvented and transformed, and how adjacent communities and neighbourhoods renegotiate their socio-cultural and economic practices during this process. These studies also look at the contestations generated by the various meanings attributed to public spaces. Additionally, the examination of private spaces, such as fortified enclaves on the city's periphery, reveals the complex politics operating within and beyond these walls (Nelson, 2011). Furthermore, Kathmandu's urban spaces are studied as potential sites of resistance (Shrestha and Aranya, 2015) and as arenas for the negotiation of strategies and tactics by marginalised groups, such as street sex workers (Basnyat, 2014). Some urban areas, such as Freak Street and Thamel, have been analysed as transnational and transcultural spaces, where diverse currents of capital, actors, and imaginations intersect (Liechty, 2017; Morimoto, 2015).

The perennial debate between tradition and modernity may inform the majority of research pertaining to the spatial dynamics of Kathmandu, but this perspective also risks 'othering' the city. Existing research on the spatiality of the Chinese presence in Kathmandu, which often characterises it as an emerging Chinatown (Linder, 2019; Sharma, 2019, 2018), can be seen as perpetuating a stereotype within a stereotype. While these studies provide valuable insights into the current state of Chinese presence in Nepal and the complex local responses to it, they largely interpret transculturation through an etic perspective, one shaped by Western Orientalist norms concerning East Asian diasporic communities. Consequently, the emic Chinese voices from the 'forming Chinatown' are largely sidelined.

My fieldwork suggests that the labelling of Thamel as a new Chinatown predominantly reflects an intricate ethnographic imagination, neither encapsulating the perceptions of other parts of the host society toward a specific community, nor representing the collective self-identification of the Chinese population. My observations reveal that few Nepalis, even those directly involved in Thamel's businesses, would describe Thamel as a Chinatown, although many do acknowledge the substantial Chinese presence in the area. Moreover, among the Chinese population in Nepal, there is considerable resistance to referring to the Thamel area as a

Chinatown (Ch. *tangrenjie* or *Zhongguocheng*). Instead, many Chinese individuals simply use the Chinese transliteration of Thamel, or divide the area into the first, second, and third streets. Rather than expressing a sense of belonging, feelings of resentment and dislike toward Thamel are more prevalent. As one of my informants passionately lamented upon entering the Second Street of Thamel, "I really hate this place. Every time I come here, I feel like blowing out."

Chinatown, akin to Shangri-la, arguably serves as one of the most potent symbols globally, furnishing both physical and virtual spaces for outsiders to conceive Chinese ethnic enclaves worldwide. As numerous studies highlight, these imaginings of Chinatowns globally are not necessarily grounded in their internal realities but are constructed through various ideologies that tend to other an imagined Chineseness, underscored by dominant Orientalist and racist notions (Anderson, 1987; Bidlingmaier, 2011; Christiansen, 2003; Lin, 1998; Seed, 2006; Strabucchi, 2017). More recently, Chinatowns worldwide, particularly those in Western metropolises, have undergone a transformation and rebranding by local governments and other actors, positioning them as touristic assets that enhance the cities' perceived globality and internationalism via a repackaged Oriental exoticism (Santos et al., 2008; Santos and Yan, 2008).

Scholars from within these Chinese ethnic communities offer more comprehensive and nuanced analyses of these places, challenging stereotype-ridden interpretations and emphasising the artificial nature of Chinatown as a potent cultural symbol of the Other. Among the body of academic work focusing on Chinatowns, Min Zhou's (1992) contribution stands out for offering an alternative model for investigating Chinese ethnic enclaves. Challenging prevailing sociological theories, which either foresee Chinatown's ultimate assimilation into mainstream society or maintain that ethnic enclaves like Chinatown will retain their distance from mainstream society (some even prophesying their eventual demise), Zhou introduces the concept of Chinatown as a socio-economic enclave. Such an enclave, Zhou argues, affords immigrant Chinese with advantages and opportunities not easily accessible in the broader society, enabling them to make societal headway without sacrificing ethnic identity and solidarity (Ibid: 10). Alongside Zhou's extensive study of multiple aspects of life in Chinatown, Chin (1996) explores the enclave's 'dark side' – organised crime – arguing that criminal gangs play a critical role in maintaining internal social order.

More recently, while racial exclusion-based Western imaginations of Chinatown as an exotic and dangerous place embedded within host societies appear to persist, the increasingly prominent political and economic influence of mainland China globally, particularly in the Global South, provides a fresh perspective to reimagine the Chinatowns scattered around the world. On one hand, it is evident that the PRC is striving to construct a unified Chinese identity among overseas Chinese, centred around the party-state's conception of Chinese identity. Numerous agents, organisations, and institutions are established and strengthened to foster a sense of connection between the global Chinese diaspora and the Chinese state (Nyíri, 2001; Suryadinata, 2017). On the other hand, while the significant role of the Chinese state should not be disregarded in studies of contemporary Chinese enclaves worldwide, it is not the sole determinant. As Tu Huynh (2018: 21) contends, these enclaves "are not simple spaces of commerce; they also present an analytical space for thinking about how diverse types of Chinese actors become implicated in and negotiate their identity and relationship to China's shifting global image and politics."

The research discussed above leads to several key conclusions. Firstly, Chinatown, as a space, is a social production (Lefebvre, 2001) resulting from various forces operating across time and space. While people may perceive it as a static cultural symbol denoting exotica, it is, in fact, an entity that changes over history and varies in different locales. Secondly, it is often external, etic perspectives rather than internal, emic ones that discursively shape Chinatown into a "centre of value" (Tuan, 2001). Furthermore, the presence of a Chinatown is not necessarily correlated with a Chinese presence in the host society, especially at a time when the concept of Chineseness is globally contested. This notion leads us to the conclusion that we need to look beyond Chinatown to gain more comprehensive insights into the transcultural interactions in which Chinese ethnicity plays a part.

Labelling Thamel as a new Chinatown might be convenient to encapsulate the complex Chinese presence within specific geographic boundaries. However, this convenience comes at the cost of essentialism and reductionism, making the label problematic. The metaphor of Chinatown can lead people to overlook the fact that Chinese capital and power, even in Chinatowns, are not stable or dominating but rather fluid, following global venturing opportunities and contested by international and domestic ethnic groups. As Li and Liang (2016) argue, Chinese ethnic power in Thamel is economically surrendered to Newar landlords, challenged by ethnic groups such as Gurung and Tamang in business, and by international

traders from India. In essence, the so-called Chinatown is transient and consistently contested by other ethnic, national, and global powers. Therefore, if Thamel is Chinatown now, it could also be or have been 'Indiatown' or 'Japantown', given the fluctuating tides of power.

If Thamel is not a Chinatown, then how does the Chinese population in Kathmandu define this area and understand their relationship with it? Ms Qu's (a pseudonym) story may give us some hints. Her story reflects a broader pattern of expectation versus reality that many Chinese immigrants face when they relocate to different places like Thamel in Kathmandu, Nepal. Her intention to leave a busy, high-stress job in a hospital in China for what she imagined to be a more relaxed lifestyle in Nepal is a narrative common among many who choose to migrate for a change in lifestyle or work environment. She, like others, sought an escape from the pressures and troubles of her previous life. However, reality often clashes with people's expectations, as was the case for Ms Qu. Instead of a more relaxing life, she found herself working longer hours due to staffing shortages at the restaurant where she worked in Thamel. The perceived tranquillity and slow pace of life she had associated with working in Nepal were not in line with her actual experiences.

Ms Qu's narrative is illustrative of the perception of Thamel as a place that deviates from people's expectations and aspirations for mobility. Many Chinese individuals I interviewed during my fieldwork view Thamel as Kathmandu's underbelly, a den for sharp-witted Nepali businesspersons. They described a landscape populated by uncertified guides seeking work, wandering vendors peddling unfamiliar local produce and street food, or even directly soliciting passers-by with phrases like "*jingang puti, jingang puti, yibai renminbi*" (Rudraksha, rudraksha, for just one hundred RMB yuan), counterfeit sadhus, and beggars specifically targeting Chinese individuals. They lament that its hyper-commercialised environment for tourists dilutes the authentic Nepali experience. However, this perceived lack of authenticity extends beyond Nepali culture to encompass Chinese culture as well. For instance, many express dissatisfaction with Thamel's Chinese restaurants, criticising their unappealing decor, questionable hygiene standards, and lack of culinary authenticity. The predominance of commercial signs in Chinese characters and Mandarin-speaking conversations, while evoking a semblance of familiarity, further underscores Thamel's status as a debased, artificial tourist and commercial space.

Thamel in Kathmandu aligns to some degree with Min Zhou's socioeconomic enclave model of Chinatown. It serves as a convenient hub for various political, cultural, and economic services and is appreciated by a portion of the Chinese population in Nepal. However, the increasing Sinicisation in this area seems to represent the very elements that an equal or larger number of Chinese individuals wish to distance themselves from. Thamel, becoming a space where many Chinese individuals must interact with other Chinese, epitomises gossip, complex interpersonal dynamics, and even enforced political centripetal forces – in essence, a stratified power network that many Chinese individuals in Nepal aspire to break free from.

Consequently, many of my informants have consciously chosen not to participate in activities in Thamel or within any Chinese community. One Chinese informant explained her perception of the lack of Chinese communities in Kathmandu, stating, "I do not believe there is a Chinese community in Nepal. While there exists an Association of Overseas Chinese in Nepal, they barely undertake any activities." She then queried:

> "What do you consider the role of a proper Association?" When I suggested they could organise social activities, she rebutted, "No, they do none of these things. They have an online WeChat group, but nobody engages in conversation. If there is any dialogue, it typically involves inviting people to hotpot meals. It's their private affair, and since I don't know them, why would I participate?"

A similar narrative of another informant further validates the rejection of Thamel as a nexus for Chinese community life. The informant, a hostel manager located on the outskirts of Thamel, asserts:

> "Are you suggesting that I should roam the streets of Thamel, formulating relationships with other Chinese individuals in order to attract more customers in the future? I assure you, that's unnecessary. I possess a steady client base and find the company of those in Thamel undesirable. I consider them to be quite peculiar. I maintain close connections with only three or four Chinese individuals. Moreover, I assert that there's no tangible Chinese community in Nepal. Everyone is merely preoccupied with their own affairs."

Such sentiments echo throughout the imagined homogenous Chinese community in Nepal, delineating boundaries that preserve their autonomy. These boundaries symbolise the centrifugal forces that shift Thamel's centrality as the dominant Chinese space in Nepal. As more individuals withdraw from Thamel or maintain a selective distance, a wide array of alternative Chinese spaces emerges within the host society. These spaces, each situated within its own unique historical, social, cultural and economic context, accommodate transcultural contacts and foster independence. These alternative spaces do not pose a challenge to the development of Thamel into a Chinatown but fill the gaps that the singular narrative of Chinatown fails to encompass. They reinforce the need to explore spaces outside Thamel, identified by different individuals as their own, within Nepal.

Shifting focus from Thamel as the primary point of interest to a variety of locales where daily life unfolds, I was confronted with a wealth of research material associated with diverse Chinese-influenced spaces in Kathmandu. Many of these spaces are situated outside Thamel, scattered throughout the Kathmandu Valley. The Chinese and Nepali occupants, with their diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and differing reasons for being there, shape the nature of these spaces. The variety in human experience further diversifies these locales. For many, their chosen area of residence and its surrounding spaces provide a stage for personal interaction with Nepal – through walks, tactile encounters, auditory experiences, and scents. In contrast, Thamel serves as an odd transitional area where individuals momentarily break from their daily routines for weekend shopping, dining or socialising, but it is not seen as a place of residence. If their stay in Nepal is considered a liminal stage in life, Thamel stands as the liminality within liminality, while ordinary life occurs elsewhere.

The subsequent sections of this chapter will explore two categories of these everyday spaces, with each category represented by a specific example: a compound inhabited by a Chinese infrastructure company and an independent homestay. These spaces have been chosen as they 'fix' significant aspects of the contact zone, namely, infrastructural projects, tourism and the service industry it stimulates. These decentralised yet interconnected spaces are enmeshed in various regional and global asymmetrical power dynamics. They act as 'stopping points' for these larger asymmetries, crystallising them into tangible forms that can be experienced, manipulated, and reformed by those occupying these spaces. In short, these spaces are world-forming (Heidegger, 1995) rather than subordinate to any dominant discourse.

The first space to be examined is a multifunctional compound housing professional Chinese expatriates employed by Chinese companies. This demographic has yet to be explored in this thesis. What type of world is constructed among these Chinese engineers, managers, workers and Nepali cleaners and chauffeurs? How do these disparate worlds coalesce behind the same high walls? How does an ordinary compound become influenced by transnational flows, and how are transnational dynamics embedded within it?

The Compound-Spatialising the Global Market and Development in Everyday Life
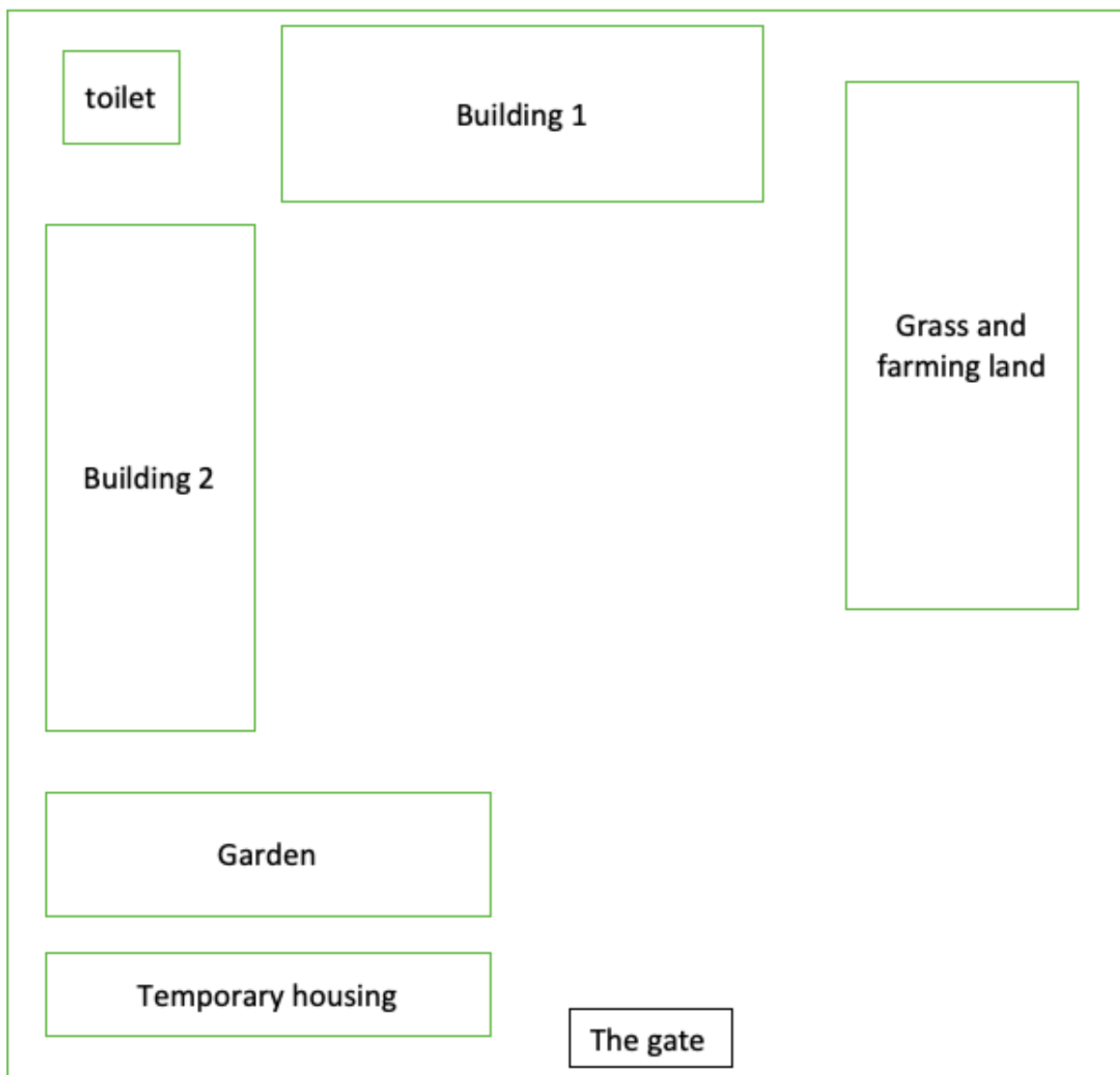
Figure 38 A Sketch of the compound's layout

The compound is located in northeastern Kathmandu, close to the ring road and is surrounded by two-meter cement walls. Inside, there are two tri-level structures. Building 1's ground floor

has an open-plan kitchen, dining area, and two private rooms. The second floor has three private rooms, while the third floor features a guest dining room and an automated mahjong table.

Building 2's ground floor boasts a large conference room with a red carpet, showcasing company achievements and housing the only TV in the compound. This floor also has three private rooms that accommodated two people each during my visit. The company's main office and a luxury suite for top executives are on the second floor, and the third floor is used for storage.

Near the entrance, temporary accommodations are set up for lower-ranking staff, including some Chinese workers, a Nepali cleaning lady, and a chauffeur. The compound's open spaces are used for gardening and farming, providing fresh produce not commonly available in the local market.

During my six-month stay, the compound was overseen by Company X, a Chinese state-owned enterprise focused on infrastructure. This company had a representative office in Kathmandu for over 30 years, linked to its South Asian branch in Dhaka, Bangladesh. However, by late 2020, due to challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic and competition, as lamented by its Director Xiong Ying (a pseudonym), the office closed. Staff were sent back to China, and Xiong was moved to Dhaka.

Despite its long history in Nepal, the office had a small staff. Director Xiong Ying, in his mid-30s, had worked in Nepal for about ten years. Before that, he, like many Chinese engineers, had worked in Africa. With two Master's degrees from Australia and fluency in English, Xiong was the main external contact for the office. He often travelled around Kathmandu, networking with other investors. Besides Xiong, three others worked and lived in the compound. Jia (a pseudonym), in his early 20s, had been in Nepal for a year. He shared his unhappiness with his role and feelings of isolation. He left suddenly to meet a potential bride in China and did not return during my stay. Engineer Duan (a pseudonym) was in Nepal for construction oversight. He mostly stayed in the compound, only leaving for exercise. He had a private room, which he kept spotless. In early 2020, he mentioned he would be going back to China for business and might not return. It turned out he did not return. Lastly, there was Old Fen (a pseudonym), whose role was somewhat ambiguous He was around fifty and had been an interior decorator. He was close friends with a former director, which likely led to his job in Nepal. His wife was

the only Chinese woman in the compound. Old Fen, introduced as Manager Fen, looked after the compound's upkeep. Like many other Chinese residents, he blurred the lines between work and home, making the entire compound his office.

Old Fen's daily tasks were comprehensive yet mundane, encompassing all activities within the compound's public and private spaces. His primary responsibility was preparing meals three times a day for the compound, often with the help of his wife, Sister Li (a pseudonym), who was the main cook. Despite not having an official bureaucratic role, Old Fen wielded significant influence in the compound. His control over daily necessities, from beer to WIFI, gave him power, shaped by the compound's internal daily politics.

In addition to the regular residents, there were eight non-regular residents during my stay. They were not direct employees of Company X but were from affiliated companies, working on projects at a Kathmandu-based Chinese institute. Four worked in property management, while the other four were involved in fence renovations, a project overseen by Company X.

These non-regular residents were provided accommodation in the compound. Unlike the regular employees, who were well educated and had stable contracts with Company X (except Old Fen), these individuals came from less privileged backgrounds in China. For many, this was their first time outside China, though some had worked in African countries. Their overseas experiences were mostly confined to Chinese compounds, offering a consistent but restricted life. These differences played a significant role in shaping the compound's everyday politics.

Generally, Xiong Ying and Old Fen bore responsibility for the others within the compound, especially the non-permanent residents (myself included), in terms of caring for and managing them. Their primary responsibilities included providing essential supplies for the compound's inhabitants. These supplies constituted public welfare that most compound residents were entitled to enjoy when working abroad, particularly those employed on temporary fixed-term contracts, who received lower wages and had limited social insurance coverage. Therefore, the full enjoyment of the public welfare provided by the compound significantly reduced their extra cost and increased their net income during their time in Nepal. Xiong Ying and Old Fen shared different aspects of this responsibility, with Ying serving as the policymaker and Old Fen as the implementer.

However, even those individuals who were indifferent to the economic benefits found their access to resources to shape their lives within the compound heavily regulated. Upon arrival in Nepal, people's passports were confiscated, to be returned only on the last day of their contracts when they needed to return to China. Other methods were also employed to limit their mobility. For example, they were required to travel to their workplaces in groups using the company's jeeps. Although they were permitted to interact with the host society outside the compound during their off-duty hours, their insecure status, resulting from the confiscation of their official identity documents, lack of language skills, and concerns about unpredictable risks, limited their movement.

Intriguingly, the limitations on mobility and access to local society were not merely imposed by the compound's management, but also self-imposed due to various perceived risks. For example, Mr. Ma, one of the four individuals working on the official institute's walls, had cultivated a regular jogging habit back in China. This routine was disrupted in Nepal, not due to lack of time or physical constraints, but out of fear of potential confrontations with local law enforcement. When I inquired about his reluctance to resume his jogging routine along the roads around our community, he mentioned that he was apprehensive about being stopped by local police. His inability to communicate effectively due to language barriers, coupled with the lack of proper identification, made him wary of venturing out for his routine exercise.

To a certain degree, sharing public welfare became a semi-compulsory rule within the compound, regulating its residents' lifestyles. Old Fen was the primary enforcer of this rule. Despite being a regular resident of the compound, Old Fen opted for a room on the ground floor next to the kitchen instead of a brighter, cleaner room on the upper floors. This room, serving not only as a resting place for him and his wife, was also a storeroom brimming with supplies ranging from Coca Cola to expensive Chinese imported white wine. Old Fen's tripartite role as the caretaker, regulator, and supplier conferred him significant power within the compound's everyday politics. He could decide the menu for dinner or chastise individuals who refused to partake, as a disciplinary measure. However, Old Fen's power rarely extended to the compound's other regular residents.

The others in the compound who were directly under Old Fen's management were the three Nepali staff, two male chauffeurs and a female cleaning lady. Anish and Sagar (pseudonyms) were chauffeurs employed by Company X. During my time in the compound, aside from

driving temporary residents to and from their workplaces, they also ran errands for the compound's residents. However, unless one was a formal staff member of Company X, Old Fen's permission was required before one could ask Anish and Sagar for assistance.

Bhawana (a pseudonym) worked as a domestic worker within the compound. Referred by her elder sister, also an employee at the Chinese official institute in Kathmandu, Bhawana found employment within the compound. A woman in her mid-twenties with a young daughter, Bhawana would occasionally bring her daughter to work as her husband, like many adult Nepali males, sought employment in the Gulf countries, leaving her without assistance in childcare. Bhawana's workday commenced around 8 am and concluded around 3 pm, with duties ranging from sweeping floors, dusting furniture, cleaning windows, assisting Old Fen's wife with meal preparation, and executing other miscellaneous tasks.

Given that Anish and Sagar were frequently out of the compound running errands, Bhawana was the most consistently present Nepali individual in the compound. A quiet person by construction, she seldom engaged in conversation with the residents, which may have been a consequence of the language barrier. Most Chinese residents had only Mandarin as their foreign language skill, and Bhawana, conversely, spoke only Nepali. This linguistic disconnect limited their communication, which was often mediated by Old Fen and his wife. However, these interactions were typically task-oriented, seldom extending into personal domains.

Old Fen's interactions with Bhawana, characterised by what I will refer to as one-way communication, were unique. This form of communication relied heavily on the repeatability of limited content. Old Fen's directives, such as "Bhawana, sweep the garden's floor," "Bhawana, change the beddings in the room," and "Bhawana, prepare the dishes" were all delivered in Chinese Mandarin, albeit with a strong regional accent. However, Bhawana's ability to execute these instructions does not indicate that she independently acquired Chinese, or even a regional dialect, by working among the Chinese residents. Instead, it highlights her everyday tactics to navigate the prevalent asymmetries in the compound by ingeniously using a set of 'shortcuts.' These shortcuts, terms or phrases with specific meanings unique to the compound's context, allowed her to understand and act on the orders. Similar context-bound shortcuts were also observed in the Chinese restaurant where I conducted fieldwork, where they facilitated successful kitchen cooperation between linguistically incompatible Nepali staff and a Chinese chef.

Non-communication within the compound was not exclusive to cross-cultural interactions; it was also apparent within the 'same' culture. The diverse social, economic, cultural, and political capital held by the different residents in the compound, combined with their respective positions within Company X's bureaucratic system, not only moulded and sustained the compound as a significant field, but also created multiple sub-fields within it. Within these sub-fields, relevant residents reside, delineate boundaries, and exercise their powers and subjectivities in the inescapable milieu of the compound.

In numerous instances, these sub-fields were non-communicative, not merely in the absence of direct communication, but also because they were constructed around various types of backgrounds originating outside the compound, which were non-transferrable. These backgrounds consequently shaped and restricted the flow of information and interpersonal exchanges within these sub-fields.

The unanticipated arrival of eight temporary residents led to a scarcity of private rooms. Owing to my personal connection with the office director, I had the privilege of a private room. However, other temporary residents were required to share rooms, and some were even assigned temporary accommodation in tin houses by the compound's entrance. Despite the enforced proximity, interpersonal closeness and internal cohesion were not necessarily enhanced. The encroachment on personal space prompted many to retreat into their small social groups both inside and outside the compound. Residents with financial capacity and confidence, usually X company's official employees, sought to expand their horizons beyond the compound, hiring professional coaches for activities like badminton. In contrast, many others, apart from a few communal activities such as shared meals, preferred to retreat into their private spaces, spending time with roommates or engaging in personal tasks and online activities. Their time was often occupied with tasks such as laundry, room cleaning, video chatting with families and friends back in China, playing online games, or streaming videos from Chinese websites. Their physical presence in Nepal did not sever their social and cultural connections in China, but rather, in some cases, it seemed to strengthen those ties, which in turn may have reinforced their individual domains within the compound, acting as a countermeasure to the compound's homogenising tendency. Thus, this brings to light the dialectical relationship between transnational mobility and immobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013), elucidating how people's immobile social contacts may facilitate their transnational movement experience.

Furthermore, although their movements through the compound's gate were regulated, this did not preclude them from discovering and inventing their realms during their limited movements outside the compound.

For most residents of the compound, the world beyond its boundaries stirred a blend of fascination and discomfort, representing both an enigmatic allure and a chaotic landscape they perceived as inferior. Despite their physical presence in this host society for varying durations, they often found themselves bereft of the liberty to truly experience it. This outside world was frequently seen as undeveloped, archaic, and incomprehensible—thus, considered unsafe and unappealing for exploration. On the other hand, their sporadic, controlled interactions with this world, particularly when they felt stifled by the compound's monotonous and boundary-less environment, stimulated their imagination.

An individual who exemplified this sentiment was Mr. You (a pseudonym), an employee in the property management department of the institute. After having spent more than four months in Nepal, he expressed his discontent to me, remarking,

> "I have been here for around four months, but I barely venture outside.
> There are no noteworthy places to visit here. All you have are different
> temples, nothing more. Even the roads here are barely walkable.
> They're uneven and winding."

Before I got to know him better, Mr. You struck me as someone who, confined to the compound, primarily indulged in smoking cigarettes and conversing with his wife over the phone. During one 'dull' afternoon, he spontaneously invited me for a stroll around the community—an excursion that extended far beyond our usual boundaries. Mr. You's confident navigation and familiarity with the various hidden paths surprised me. This walk facilitated a more in-depth conversation between us, with topics ranging from university major selection (as his son was nearing high school graduation) to his previous solitary walks, revealing how he had become so acquainted with the paths.

In most instances, the exercise of power within each sub-field was conducted subtly and unobtrusively, much like Mr. You's walks. The majority of the residents sought a harmonious balance between their private and public lives within the compound, especially those whose

individual spheres of influence were not sufficiently robust and hence, dependent on the broader compound field. After all, the provision of free and stable supplies of daily necessities was a significant attraction for individuals striving to make a living in a foreign country. Furthermore, although each resident had their unique sphere within the compound, few desired to publicly challenge the broader field, even when it infringed upon their smaller spheres, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This reluctance stemmed from the perceived high likelihood of failure and the potential subsequent exacerbation of their situation. For instance, Mr. Li (a pseudonym), another temporary resident of the compound, publicly protested against Old Fen about wanting to move to an unoccupied room in Main Building 2 from his current room in the tin house. His action not only failed to achieve his objective but also worsened his already strained relationship with other residents, particularly Old Fen.

One of the most potent unifying forces within the compound was nationalism. Despite my critique of the concepts of Chineseness and Chinese places, I do not deny the influence of nationalist sentiment, underscored by the narrative of China's rising economic, diplomatic, and military prowess, in shaping the compound as a social space. Topics like room allocation or meal types elicited varied reactions from residents. However, nationalist themes, usually manifested through comparisons with China often disparaging the local society, encountered minimal dissent within the compound.

The collective dining in the large canteen, especially in the evenings, often served as a platform where Nepal was judged. The conversation could be centered around anything, influenced by residents' observations, past experiences, rumours, hearsay, and anecdotes. For instance, during the Hindu festival *Haribodhini Ekadashi Brata* associated with the god Vishnu, Old Fen initiated a discussion based on a comment from Sagar the chauffeur that he could not eat for the entire day. This statement, coupled with a misunderstanding that equated the festival to Ramadan, sparked a conversation about the numerous festivals in Nepal—a stereotype heavily propagated in Chinese media—and led to complaints about the local people's work efficiency. Old Fen, finishing his wine, concluded: "Have you seen the little huts constructed along the roads to our place? In China, they could have been finished in one day, but here, how long have you been seeing the materials laying there," prompting laughter from everyone present.

In addition to providing entertainment, the discussions held at the dinner table played a role in identifying potential risks to the compound and, one step further, disciplining or eliminating

them, which includes both local Nepalis and the compound's Chinese members. Unfortunately, due to factors such as my identity as a PhD researcher at a European university, my occasional dissenting opinion, and my inconsistent attendance at communal dining events, I was regarded by some residents as a potential threat. This perception was particularly held by individuals like Old Fen, who were keen on challenging the boundaries of my sphere by using communal dining events to depict me as an unpatriotic university student serving the interests of the West. By doing so, they enhanced their own influence by intertwining it with that of the compound's micro-community and the larger "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006).

The compound's interactions with the host society and other urban entities were strictly controlled. Only a few residents, like Xiong Ying and Old Fen, who held the most power, were permitted to communicate with the outside world. They were not only allowed to leave and invite others into the compound but also had exclusive access to the jeeps. Although other residents could leave under certain conditions, they lacked the power to invite others in. Certain Nepali staff members also had the right to cross the compound's boundaries and interact with local individuals such as water carriers and waste collectors.

The compound's dual identity of being embedded in the social relations of both the remote home country and the host society, coupled with its controlled interactions with the outside world, shaped it into a bubble (Fechter, 2007; van Bochove and Engbersen, 2015). Within this bubble, residents could lead a semblance of their everyday lives. This "expatriate-bubble" metaphor is often used by scholars and expatriates to depict daily life in a foreign country, emphasising the clear demarcation between inside and outside spaces. As Fechter (2007: 151) suggests, the "bubble" symbolises a boundary that shelters the Inside from the Outside. However, she also posits that this bubble is not airtight but permeable, with the Outside seeping in as much as the expatriates attempt to extend its boundaries without bursting it entirely.

Although I question whether the bubble in my study is as transparent as Fechter describes, I concur that it can serve as a shelter for its inhabitants and that it is both reflective and permeable. While my analysis emphasises the compound as a place of regulation and control, I also recognise its role in facilitating the transnational experiences of many Chinese expatriates, especially those from marginalised backgrounds. Mr. You, for example, shared that he had never anticipated working abroad. Despite often expressing discontent about the monotony of life in Nepal, he was grateful for the opportunity it provided for his transnational mobility. For

individuals like Mr. You, the compound facilitated not only their movement but also their stability in a foreign land—it was their semblance of home away from home. As Old Gu, a seasoned Chinese expatriate residing another compound, recounted his initial days in Nepal around fifteen years ago, "my first task was to find a place to live here. I was thinking we needed a HOME here. Only after we had a home, then we can develop." (personal interview, 2020)

The compound served as a spatial fix (Harvey, 2001) for its residents, providing a sense of home and stability where they could rejuvenate from fatigue, homesickness, depression, and emotional wounds. The communal dining events, while functioning as sites of discrimination and discipline, also presented opportunities for joy and cultural exchange. Regional recipes from across China were shared, providing a culinary escape from the perceived chaos and monotony of their Nepali surroundings. Communal food preparation and shared inebriation acted as cohesive elements, fostering mutual solidarity and cooperation. These collective activities solidified the canteen as a fundamental source of cohesion, stimulating mutual solidarity and cooperation among the residents, while occasionally acting as a flashpoint for domestic conflicts (Warde and Martens, 2000).

The compound's regulations, provisions, and role in stabilising residents' lives contributed to fostering a hyper-consciousness (Moran, 2004: 40 cited by Norum, 2013) that distinguished the residents from the Nepali locals and other Chinese, informing their perceptions of the outside world. However, this hyper-consciousness did not necessarily equate to a privileged, detached existence. It instead represented a complex of transnational asymmetries at the level of states, collective groups, and individuals.

This constellation of institutionalisation and resistance took specific but mutable forms, shaped by the residents' interactions with each other and the outside world. This amalgamation of institutionalisation and resistance assumes tangible but evolving forms, defined by the interactive practices among the residents and their engagement with the broader environment. These interactive power dynamics highlight the compound as an assemblage of social spaces while activating the relations between these social spaces and the unique material spaces within the compound. These material spaces—such as the canteen, office, private en-suite, shared bedroom, and bathroom—enable residents from various backgrounds to exercise and manifest their individual agency. Consequently, the compound evolves into a mosaic of "multiple places"

(Liechty, 2010: 270), shaped and influenced by the residents' spatial practices (de Certeau, 1984: 117). These practices play a pivotal role in shaping the residents' daily lives and their personal identities within the compound. The ongoing transformation process is continually influenced by the dominant power within the compound as it attempts to impose its "strategy" and the various residents employ "tactics" of resistance (ibid). Though these roles may vary in their respective powers, they are both critical in reshaping the compound's material spaces.

Both the compound's strategy and the residents' tactics were perceptible throughout the compound, and they were intrinsically characterised by improvisation, reactiveness, dependence, and fluidity. They were both shaped by and helped shape the compound's physical spaces, while also adhering to general regulations from the home country.

For example, the compound was not built from scratch by Company X. Instead, it was rented from a local landlord, with the basic layout and even a dog from the landlord retained. The physical structures in place significantly influenced how the regulations—established in an office located thousands of miles away in China—could be implemented on Nepali ground. Not a single individual, including Xiong Ying, could accurately recall these regulations formulated by HQ. As the director of the representative office, Ying's primary concerns often revolved around financial figures and interpersonal relations. For example, the budget allocation and routine expenditures of the compound had to align with the standards formulated in China. These guidelines were intended to be universally applicable across the company's global businesses rather than being tailored to specific regions. The universally intended guidelines resulted in a general disregard for the local uniqueness of different markets.

As Ying and other Chinese expatriates who sought to establish a comfortable office in Kathmandu reported, the process was fraught with challenges, involving many back-and-forths between them, local landlords, and the office in China. A good property was often lost due to HQ's suspicion over their proposal or the landlord's changing mind. "They (the people at HQ office) don't know what we are doing here," lamented Mr. Gou (a pseudonym), an employee of another SoE whose office was adjacent to ours. He continues,

> "They have not even a single idea about how difficult to find a proper
> place in Nepal. I was sent here with another colleague to explore the
> local market. We needed to find a place not only for our stay but also

for the big troop which may join us later. Then, you know what? The HQ office said the place we found was too big, exceeding the standards for two people. Do they even know we were looking for a place for a representative office? Do they know how hard is it to find a good place in Kathmandu? … I also needed to pay for the mattress with my own money because they say it is not included and we were already out of money." (personal interview, 2020)

The local-global disconnect compounded the struggle of establishing a Chinese compound in Nepal. Individuals like Xiong and Gou, positioned as mediators between local and global directives, grappled with the unique local rules and the universal global regulations' untranslatability. Yet, they had to devise specific, tailored tactics to navigate the challenging landscape, often resorting to grounded solutions to avoid souring relations with HQ. These tactics were discreet, barely noticeable, and invisible, occasionally involving intricate paperwork and negotiations with local actors. It frequently meant that the intermediaries had to bear personal costs, such as Mr. Gou paying for a mattress. At times, feigning incompetence was part of these tactics. As Xiong advised, "If you manage the compound and the Nepali market too efficiently, you'll be anchored here indefinitely, as the leaders may think no one else can match your performance."

The moment individuals like Xiong and Old Fen established themselves within the compound, they were automatically bestowed the power to design and implement its regulations. While these rules needed to conform to the general directives of HQ, they possessed a high degree of autonomy and were tailored specifically to the compound. In many Chinese compounds I visited, although not the case in our own, the regulations were prominently displayed in easily visible locations. While these formulated rules aimed to maximise managerial control (Pun and Chan, 2013), they were often flexibly applied and negotiated on the ground, particularly in compounds with fewer residents. Regulations were more symbolic than practical, and the compound was primarily ruled by individuals rather than laws.

The physical structure of the compound also provided a significant advantage to residents, enabling them tactics to broaden and enhance their social interactions within the host society. For instance, Xiong repurposed a secluded space on the top floor of the main building as a private dining area for VIP guests of the office. Moreover, even though residents could not alter

the fundamental structure of the compound, they had limited freedom to innovate within their spaces to enhance their living conditions. For instance, Old Fen repurposed an open space in the compound into a small vegetable garden, supplying the kitchen with various home-grown produce.

However, the freedom to utilise these tactical measures was not uniformly distributed among the residents. The compound's rules often favoured those with more experience, usually measured by their tenure within the compound. Consequently, one resident's tactical resistance could become another's strategy. In many compounds I visited, the individuals in charge had been stationed in Nepal for significantly longer, some for over a decade. Conversely, more junior staff typically only served one or two-year stints. The asymmetrical relations in bureaucratic rankings, life experience, and local knowledge enabled those in senior positions to integrate personal interests and preferences with common regulations, and permitted them to exercise these powers in diverse spaces within the compound.

As previously addressed, tactics were performed in different areas within the compound, with examples already provided. The following section will delve deeper into the everyday spatial tactics employed by Bhawana, the maid, in her resistance against hierarchical division and discrimination in the compound. Bhawana served a multitude of roles within the compound. As the resident maid, her responsibilities spanned various aspects of compound maintenance. Moreover, she was the only Nepali resident in the compound who was granted access to most of the compound's spaces during work hours. Anish and Sagar, in contrast, had considerably restricted access, largely confined to their tin houses near the entrance and other outdoor areas. They were even barred from using the indoor bathrooms and were provided with an outdoor facility at the corner of the compound.

Much of Bhawana's work was centred around the main buildings 1 and 2, including tidying residents' private rooms upon request. However, her access was highly conditional, allowed only during work hours. At other times, she was forbidden from entering the main buildings. After completing her duties, Bhawana would often relax in the garden or in one of the tin huts near the gate. The hut she occupied, initially intended for the security guard who never showed up, was furnished with an abandoned bed and mattress. This was the closest thing Bhawana had to a personal space within the compound. Despite being her refuge, the hut's proximity to the compound's main entrance and its lack of doors or windows left Bhawana exposed to the

prying eyes of other residents. For instance, Old Fen, Bhawana's direct superior in the compound, frequently criticised her for being lazy, accusing her of spending too much time on her phone during work hours. His complaints often extended beyond Bhawana to the broader Nepali population, linking their perceived laziness to the nation's underdeveloped status.

Old Fen's critique of Bhawana and, by extension, the entire nation of Nepal is legitimised through the lens of capitalist productivity, where time is a crucial resource for production, reproduction, and global expansion (Jessop, 2002; Knight, 1934). Reports suggest that reducing time costs can increase family net income (Gross et al., 2018), leading to a widespread perception of waiting time as negative, passive, unproductive, and wasted. Therefore, Old Fen's criticism of Bhawana underscores their strictly capitalist relationship as employer and employee, marked by an emotionless, calculating focus on productivity. By framing Nepal as a nation stuck in the past, his complaint echoes modern China's discourse of development and modernity, which conceptualises progress as an inevitable, temporal journey for all nations. This criticism also aligns with the prevailing national pride narrative in China, which celebrates its rapid development in a few decades compared to Western nations. This narrative indicates a capitalist logic of time in managing spaces within the compound.

However, Bhawana was not entirely submissive to this capitalist order. Despite relying on the compound to support her family, she exhibited her agency during breaks, carving out her own time and space within the compound. Challenging the notion of waiting as wastage, ethnographically-oriented scholars have offered alternative interpretations of waiting. (Rotter, 2016) suggests that waiting is an intentional and active process. Similarly, (Sandhya, 2022) disputes the idea that waiting equates to inactivity and instead highlights its various social meanings. Therefore, what Old Fen deemed as waste represented to Bhawana a chance to recharge, reconnect with friends and family, and reassert her agency in the compound's hierarchical and monotonous working environment. Just as the Chinese residents of the compound used it to anchor their place amidst transnational flows, Bhawana also transformed the shabby tin hut into a temporary refuge from the outside and inside worlds. Her spatial tactics can be better understood through the words of her Nepali colleague, Anish, who also lived in a tin house within the compound. When asked about his experience working and living with the Chinese in the compound, Anish responded, "It is good, much better than when I drove trucks in Gulf." Assuming I might consider his reply as mere flattery, he added, "Yes, I mean it. I can

work in my own country, get paid well, and have a place to stay in Kathmandu. I am satisfied with my work now." (personal interview, 2020)

Bhawana's experience with the compound's capitalist strategies is not an isolated incident. It represents a widespread focus on efficiency, a fundamental principle underlining the construction not only of the compound but also of the entire Nepal-China contact zone. As mentioned earlier, many Chinese people in Nepal prioritise temporal matters over spatial experiences, as evidenced by their concerns about timing and productivity. I would attribute these attitudes to the contact zone's logic of capitalist production. This means that most actors within the contact zone aim to create more capital and gain more benefits in a shorter timeframe.

This is evident in the behaviour of Chinese tourists, who due to their limited vacation time, prefer to cram more experiences into a shorter period. Similarly, Nepali tourism agents attempt to maximise the profitable tourist season by catering to as many tourists as possible. Chinese investors aspire to attain net profits quickly, hence their complaints about the slow work efficiency in Nepal. Even transient Chinese traders aim to accumulate as much capital as possible during their short stay in Nepal. The impatience extends to state-level actors as well. Nepal laments the lack of tangible projects five years after joining China's Belt and Road Initiative (Giri, 2022), while Chinese engineers and experts express their readiness and frustration waiting for Nepal's concrete action.

Within the compound, many residents start counting down their return or relocation days from the moment they arrive in Nepal. These residents prefer to complete their work in Nepal as quickly as possible. They live in a constant state of impatience, even though some of them realise that they cannot expedite their time due to contract constraints. Those who could potentially enhance their daily work efficiency to reduce their time in Nepal focus heavily on their work, downplaying their local experiences. After all, any hardships faced are only temporary.

This sense of temporality, primarily gauged by capital and efficiency, defines the compound's central role as a place of capitalist production and reproduction. It influences the insiders' perception of the external world, leading to a collective attitude that devalues anything that does not yield profit. This collective mindset shapes the compound's physical attributes, with many parts kept in merely passable conditions, which in turn discourages residents from

prolonging their stay. The indifferent attitudes, to a certain degree, make people acquiescent to the established powers of those who reside in the compound for a more extended period, thereby reinforcing internal disparities.

However, the capitalist compound, along with other contemporary "Chinese places" in Nepal, are not timeless, homogeneous, or static. Instead, they merely exemplify the current capital-driven flows connecting the modern Nepal-China contact zone. When these specific periods and locations are historicised within a more extensive timeline and broader spectrum, they become spaces of permanent temporariness (Collins, 2012), established at the intersection of the past, present, and future.

To my knowledge, there are few documented records of Chinese expatriate compounds in Nepal since the 1950s. However, many Nepalis from the Panchayat era, especially the 1960s, remember Chinese construction sites, not technically compounds, as hubs facilitating Chinese ideological propaganda. Here, the Nepali version of Mao Zedong's Red Book was distributed, revolutionary films were screened (Hutt, 2016; Lovell, 2019; Malla, 2012; Mulmi, 2021), and rumours of China's political conspiracy against the Nepali monarchy spread (Malla, 2012: 108-109).

Besides being the cradle of Communism, particularly Maoism in Nepal, these old Chinese places also served as sites fostering anti-colonial solidarity. Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese engineers, technicians, and experts worked, lived, ate, and even slept "foot to foot" with Nepali workers (personal interview, 2019a). These spaces, born out of China's economic aid to Nepal, were grounded in principles of solidarity, equality, friendship, and cooperation. An agreement on economic aid between Nepal and China even specified that the living expenses of Chinese experts and technicians working in Nepal should not exceed the standards of their Nepali counterparts (Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, 1960).

Mao-era Communist ideologies also influenced the social and material structures within these old compounds. An informant recollects a Kathmandu-based Chinese compound as a small but self-sufficient community with facilities such as a clinic and grocery store (personal interview, 2019b). These factors indicate another historical trajectory of Chinese places in Nepal and another supporting force, which, in contrast to its contemporary counterpart, had a different definition of 'waste.'

China's shift towards marketisation since the 1980s also impacted the shaping of Chinese places in Nepal. 1981 marked the year when Chinese companies began to participate in Nepal's project contracting market (Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of China in Nepal, 2020), competing with Western and Indian companies. The transition from comradeship to capitalist calculations between the two states began to surface. The ideological transformation also led to changes in people's lifestyles. As one informant recalls, Chinese individuals in Nepal began to adopt more Westernised lifestyles in the 1990s. They started wearing Western suits, travelling by car, and frequenting high-end hotels (personal interview, 2020a). This period also marked the beginning of the X company's story in Nepal.

The capitalist strategies that initiated and sustained the production of the X company's compound in Nepal also led to its downfall. The company's business had been declining for years before my arrival at the compound. This downturn was primarily due to an influx of similar Chinese companies entering the limited Nepali market. The surge in Chinese investment in Nepal continually eroded the profits the market could offer. The COVID-19 pandemic delivered the final blow to the company and compound.

Once, when I described the compound to a European scholar from a Western university, the scholar advised me to move out quickly, or else I would become as "miserable" as the other residents. I was both shocked and too embarrassed to ask the scholar to clarify what it meant. Yet, this remark stuck with me throughout my time in the compound and while writing this thesis. Was life in the compound miserable? I can understand why such a conclusion might be drawn from a European perspective. The life inside could be viewed as dull and monotonous, with limited personal space and confined individual freedom. Residents were perceived as arrogant, racist, and self-isolated, looking down on anything associated with the host society. Despite being in a transcultural contact zone, only one language held sway within the compound.

However, describing life within the compound as miserable assumes a universal standard that revitalises a colonial sense of superiority in transcultural communications. By deeming the in-compound life miserable, these perspectives suggest an opposite ideal, possibly resembling the hyper-elite lifestyle of Western expatriates in Nepal during the colonial era. This lifestyle, as portrayed in Han Suyin's novel (1958), involved mingling with the country's elite, high-

ranking military generals, ministers, and Kathmandu-based international communities, with a deep appreciation for Nepal's diverse culture. Spaces would include elite clubs, upscale five-star hotels, and cocktail parties exclusive to expatriates and local elites. Expatriate lifestyles that do not fit these colonial and capitalist globalisation standards are seen as deficient, reduced to modern invisible colonial others, and deemed incapable of transnational communication.

The narratives of the compound offer an insightful, spatial understanding of the asymmetries, practices of control, and resistance within the contact zone. The residents of the compound come from diverse backgrounds and face various forms of inequality within capitalist globalisation. They aspire to amass capital in order to maintain or augment their social status, as well as that of their families and future generations, either through transnational encounters or by leveraging their limited resources. Yet, they cannot entirely escape the pressures of modern society and may encounter novel forms of control and exploitation. In this regard, the compound embodies the constraints of modern life from which residents seek to escape but cannot fully elude. Nevertheless, the residents are not entirely powerless. They carve out specific spaces into meaningful places where they can fill life's voids with opportunities for leisure, connection, and resistance (Seo and Skelton, 2017). These spatial practices cannot fully resolve the challenges they face, but they offer temporary relief to their difficult situations. The dialectical interplay between seemingly opposing forces, such as discipline and resistance, strategy and tactics, and control and escape, not only reshapes the compound but also the contact zone in which it exists. Similarly, scholars (e.g. Sautman and Hairong, 2016; Yan et al., 2020) argue that the lives of Chinese people in Africa should not be reduced to a single category, nor should Western discourses portray them as self-isolated and racially discriminatory. Instead, their life stories, situated experiences, and movement trajectories disclose the broader asymmetrical structures of the era in which they struggle, as well as the individual experiences within it.

The following section introduces a brief history of a homestay in Kathmandu, privately operated and distinct from the compound where most residents were expatriates deployed by Chinese companies. Despite the contrasting backgrounds, an analysis of the guesthouse's biography aims to illustrate how specific actors utilise spatial practices to negotiate and pursue their personal aspirations within the wider context of structural asymmetry.

The *minsu*-Dreams and Reality in the Transnational Spaces

Dai Wai [14] was a middle-aged Chinese man running a *minsu*, or private residence accommodation, in Kathmandu. Developing in mainland China, *minsu* is a relatively new practice of providing guesthouse services, typically transforming private residential spaces in the countryside into serene, idyllic places for urban tourists seeking an 'authentic' experience of a slower-paced rural life. In the context of Nepal, the *minsu* analysed in this section closely resembles the various homestays that have sprung up across the country's rural areas.

For different people, the *minsu* was known by different names. Tourists who booked rooms online knew it by its official brand name, Hotel Tenzin's House Kathmandu, highlighting the close relationship with its Nepali manager and de facto investor, Tenzin Sherpa (a pseudonym). However, among its residents (mostly Chinese), it was often referred to as Dai Wai's *minsu* or Dai Wai's place, signifying the prominent presence and significant contribution of Dai Wai, the Chinese frontline keeper of the *minsu*. As this brief introduction implies, the various names of the compound represent more than just linguistic identifiers. More importantly, these names encapsulate the compound's shifting existence within transnational cultural, social, and political structures, wherein the same material space is interpreted and reconfigured differently. I will soon illustrate how the compound, once a privileged Nepali family's home, was transformed into a *minsu* through various transnational spatial practices motivated by differing, and sometimes contrasting, concepts of culture and modernity. Furthermore, my decision to refer to the compound as a *minsu*, rather than a homestay, hostel, or guesthouse, is meant to emphasise its embeddedness in the transcultural trajectories of the Chinese tourism flow in Nepal.

The *minsu* compound can be understood as a space where the biographies of subjects and objects (Gosden and Marshall, 1999; Kopytoff, 1986) are produced through their entanglement. This dialectical relationship between humans and things is aptly pointed out by Appadurai when discussing the politics of things' value: "We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories (Appadurai, 1986: 5).

Two principal narrative threads can be discerned in the process of categorising the biographies of the compound. The first encompasses an array of narratives relating to the physical

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[14] Dai Wai, translated as Brother Wai, is the nickname of the Chinese manager of the *minsu*. The term combines the Nepali word, *Dai*, which means "elder brother," with the manager's Chinese surname, Wai (a pseudonym). This nickname reflects his role and position within the *minsu* and is also a symbolic blending of his identity across the cultural contexts of China and Nepal.

compound: its architectural evolution, its initial role as a residence for a prosperous local family prior to its conversion into a *minsu*, the socio-material metamorphosis it underwent as it transitioned into a *minsu*, and its potential trajectories in the future. The second narrative thread relates to the individuals interacting with and within the *minsu,* with a particular focus on the narratives of the *minsu's* manager and investor. Critical questions arise such as: Who are Dai Wai and Tenzin? What are their antecedent histories prior to their involvement with the *minsu*? How did their paths converge? What were the motivations that prompted their joint venture to run a *minsu*? What are their individual and collective experiences within the context of the *minsu*?

If we interpret the *minsu* compound as a decipherable text, the process of decoding and interpretation is far from being a monolithic endeavour. Rather, it is subject to the multifarious sensations, perceptions, and conceptions of a diverse array of readers, thereby facilitating their understanding and consequent shaping of the space into distinctly meaningful places (Tuan, 1977). The analysis that ensues is largely a synthesis of my subjective interpretation of objects, interactions with objects from the perspective of other actors, and subjective experiences of subjects and objects. The objective until the end of this section is not to render a definitive depiction of Dai Wai's compound but to underscore its intricate complexity as a dynamic transnational social space within the contact zone.

While the compound analysed in the preceding section may exemplify a traditional, state-endorsed, and historically interactive pattern within the contact zone, the *minsu* under examination here appears to epitomise more recent, grassroots, and heterogeneous flows within the contact zone, some of which may even interrogate the extant conception of Chineseness within the compound. In a broader context, the representation of Chinese involvement in the hospitality industry in Nepal, and in the larger South Asian context, is predominantly characterised by Chinese restaurants. These establishments provide substantial materials that both insiders and outsiders can use to envisage and construct overseas Chinese (and other) ethnic identities and communities (e.g. Abbots, 2016; Cho, 2010; Kharel, 2016; Panyagaew, 2007; Ray, 2004; Zhou, 1992). They also offer a space for transcultural agents to meet, negotiate, challenge, and collaborate, culminating in the creation of transcultural products such as Indian-Chinese cuisine—an interpretation of "Indian food customised to align with Indians' imagination and expectation of what Chinese food should be" (Sankar, 2017: 273).

Mark Liechty (2017) provides an insightful delineation of the transformative trajectories of Chinese restaurants and Chinese food within the Nepali context. The introduction of Chinese food to Nepal coincided with Nepal's wider exposure to the global community. Interestingly, the entry of Chinese food into Nepal was not facilitated by Nepali or Chinese actors, but through the entrepreneurial efforts of the Anglo-Indian couple, Thomas Mendies and Elizabeth MacDonald. Seeking supplementary income from their Snow View Hotel, they transformed the hotel's dining room into a Chinese restaurant in 1956, hiring two Chinese cooks from Calcutta, Mr Wong and Mr Fong. Among the clientele of the restaurant, the most prominent was perhaps B.P. Koirala, the leader of the Nepal Congress Party and the first democratically elected Prime Minister of Nepal. Intriguingly, it was during Koirala's period of incarceration, resultant of unsuccessful political endeavours, that Nepal's initial "take-out" service for Chinese food came into existence. Despite Koirala's confinement, Mendies routinely arranged for Chinese meals to be delivered to him in prison.

The proliferation of "Chinese" food in Nepal coincided with the influx of Tibetan refugees post 1959. Chinese cuisine, not just confined to high-end restaurants and hotel dining rooms, also found a prominent place in the menus of humbler establishments run by Tibetan immigrants and refugees. The survival and prosperity of these establishments were closely linked with the influx of Western budget travellers. The specifics surrounding the inception and location of the first Chinese restaurant run by Chinese nationals in Nepal remain uncertain. However, Liechty (2017: 194) suggests that the Hungry Eye, purportedly the first restaurant on Freak Street—the Hippie epicentre of Kathmandu at the time—was operated by a Chinese national, Mr Wong, and his Tibetan wife from Darjeeling.

The cohort of Chinese restaurants initiated and overseen by Westerners, Tibetans, and India-based Chinese are not directly affiliated with the Chinese hospitality establishments that have burgeoned in Thamel and other precincts of Kathmandu. Despite certain similarities, these entities are influenced and upheld by disparate forces that span time and space. The latter Chinese hospitality ventures represent a substantially newer stream, predominantly initiated in the 2010s and originating from mainland China. They are actively managed by Chinese nationals, particularly those of Han ethnicity. The target demographic of these Chinese restaurants is not the indigenous Nepali population, but Chinese tourists, expatriates, and other Chinese temporary residents in Nepal. Hence, contemporary Chinese hospitality facilities in

Nepal, including restaurants, hostels, hotels, and grocery stores, evolve in tandem with the Nepal-based Chinese populace as complementary entities.

However, the role of a *minsu* as a subsidiary element of Chinese tourism in Nepal should not undermine its intricate functions entwined within various transcultural trajectories. A strand of literature that explores hostels/guesthouses, albeit fewer in quantity, problematises the material, social, and cultural existence of hostels, investigating their fluid attributes as cultural and social activities beyond mere economic entities. This exploration of them is intrinsically connected with the study of backpackers or budget travellers across the globe, particularly young, middle-class Westerners traversing the Global South (Binder, 2004; Matthews, 2008; Muzaini, 2006; O'Reilly, 2005; Richards and Wilson, 2004). Certain academics focus on the dialectical relationship between backpackers and budget accommodation spaces, examining how the practices and discourses of backpackers shape places like hostels and, conversely, how these "passages of rites" (Cohen, 2011; Wilson et al., 2007; Wilson and Richards, 2008) deconstruct and remix backpackers' identities, social relations, cultural backgrounds, and capitals. In this section, I will align with the epistemology and methodology of this body of literature, probing the cultural and social significance of Dai Wai's *minsu* within the Nepal-China contact zone.

In contrast to the European context, where a hostel is closely associated with young budget travellers, in the Nepali and South Asian contexts, a hostel is more likely to be understood as a type of housing accommodating students residing away from their homes (Kunwar et al., 2016; Patgiri, 2022; Pathania, 2016). In the Nepali environment, the type of buildings that may be recognised as hostels by Western tourists are more often referred to as guest houses or homestays. Recently, homestays have become an increasingly significant focus for scholars interested in the sustainable development of Nepal, especially in its rural areas (Acharya and Halpenny, 2013; Banking Development and Research Unit, 2015; Biswakarma, 2015; Dong, 2020; Dube and Sharma, 2018; Karki et al., 2019; Pasa, 2020) indicating a potentially sustainable approach to capitalising on the country's tourism sector. Some researchers employ a realist economic approach to quantify the role of homestays in local sustainable development. Simultaneously, other scholars use ethnographic methodologies, investigating the social and cultural significance of homestays at the village level and scrutinising how power dynamics at different levels interact with homestays in a local context. In his study of hotels, rather than homestays, Francis Khek Gee Lim's work (2007) provides considerable inspiration for this thesis. He has explored the cultural significance of hotels in Nepal's Himalayan region, viewing

them as sites of power contextualised by various interconnected historical, social, political, and cultural networks involving different actors.

The specific form of the hostel, the *minsu*, represents another transcultural trajectory potentially linked to colonialism in East Asia, othering imagination, urbanisation, and economic development in rural areas. In the context of mainland China, the concept of the *minsu* is a recent emergence in both the tourism industry and academic study. Certain scholars (Tsai and Hung-Sheng, 2021; Xiang et al., 2021) have adopted the Western concept of Bed & Breakfast to interpret and comprehend the *minsu*. In doing so, they have only captured the analogous forms of these two entities in terms of providing food and accommodation services, usually in private homes. However, they largely disregard the local history of the *minsu*, and the local power relations within which the contemporary *minsu* has been recreated in mainland China. Originating in Taiwan in the 1980s, the *minsu* was born out of local people's vision of a bucolic alternative lifestyle, inspired by Taiwan's peripheral coastal areas and cultural remnants of Japanese colonisation (Rowen, 2016).

The *minsu* arrived in mainland China following the trends of *nong jia le* (Delights in Farm Guesthouses) and *yang jia le* (Delights in Foreign Guesthouses)(Park, 2008), roughly around the 2010s. Much like homestays in Nepal, *minsu* has also sprouted in many of China's rural regions by converting the original dwellings of rural residents (Chen, 2021) or architectural remnants left by European colonisers at old summer stations into tranquil and leisurely tourist sites. The emergence of the *minsu* in many rural parts of China has significantly reshaped local economic and community structures, village landscapes, and power relations. A considerable amount of urban capital is drawn to rural areas, either through cooperation (Zhao, 2021) or as individual rural tourism makers (Chen, 2021). It should be noted that the *minsu* as an alternative lifestyle (Zhang et al., 2021) catering to people's imaginations of different life possibilities is not exclusive to *minsu* guests. The *minsu* also serves as a critical location where its managers, keepers, and staff strive to balance a controllable poetic life with the realities of conducting business.

The concept of running a *minsu*, as described by Dai Wai and others like him in Nepal, goes beyond merely conducting commercial activities. Many of these Chinese business owners expressed that the tranquillity and slower pace of life provided by their *minsu* holds more value to them than the potential economic profits. These individuals, unsettled by their business ventures, bring their own interpretation of modernity to Nepal, influenced by China's pervasive

discourses of development and modernity. The discourses surrounding *minsu* foster practices that construct, shape, and reshape the physical *minsu* in Nepal. However, as this section will later reveal, such a 'Chinese' reflection of modernity and development may not necessarily align with Nepal's *bikas* ideology (see Pigg, 1992).

I initially met Dai Wai, the Chinese manager of the *minsu*, at an art exhibition organised by a Chinese official agency based in Kathmandu in November 2019. I introduced myself as a PhD researcher interested in the Chinese communities in Nepal and inquired about his work in Kathmandu, considering he could potentially be a useful informant. Dai Wai hesitated for a moment before revealing he owned a *minsu* nearby and invited me to visit. As I will later illustrate, Dai Wai's hesitation hinted at his discomfort, and even dissatisfaction, with his identity and social status as a minor *minsu* keeper, from his perspective. This issue of identity and the implication of possessing little social capital haunted Dai Wai during his time in Nepal, and even after he left the country.

Roughly half an hour later, I found myself sipping Chinese imported black tea at the large wooden table in the *minsu's* living room, listening to Dai Wai speak about his Sherpa partner's climbing achievements. The *minsu* is situated in an urban commercial area of Kathmandu. Despite its location in one of the city's busiest and most bustling areas, the *minsu* is tucked away in an alley, offering both convenient transportation and a quiet environment.

The spatial layout and design of Dai Wai's *minsu*, its architectural features, and interior decor provide a distinctly hospitable environment that immerses guests in a lifestyle defined by relaxation, greenery, and casual living. The *minsu* property is roughly divided into two parts: the main building and an expansive open public space featuring grasslands and a garden. This design choice can be attributed to the property owner, rumoured to be a high-ranking officer at Nepal's only international airport, who was previously incarcerated for bribery. Though he likely did not anticipate his house being transformed into a *minsu*, his aesthetic preferences cater well to foreigners seeking a taste of Nepal's exotic appeal.

The main building's architectural style blends Nepali architectural elements with European neoclassical designs, a style referred to as the Nepali neoclassical hybrid (Weiler, 2009). The three-story western-style building is adorned with Nepali motifs tied to Hinduism and Buddhism, particularly on its doors and windows. Beyond the main building lies a large garden, encircled by a narrow path of red bricks. Initially, the garden was void of any structures, save

for grass. However, inspired by swings featured during the 2020 Dashain festival, Dai Wai had a large swing installed in the garden.

The use of Nepali cultural motifs intensifies within the interior decor of the building, particularly on the ground floor. The open-concept kitchen merges with a dining room and a living area equipped with a fireplace, and Nepali-style motifs pervade these spaces. Religious symbols such as snakes, Vishnu, and auspicious Buddhist icons like the lotus are carved into the walls, which are made to resemble red clay, and on wooden windows.

This heavy presence of religious symbols in the *minsu* can be seen as cultural appropriation, where these symbols are transferred from domestic spaces to public tourist areas. While the form and location of these motifs within the building remain unchanged, their function alters significantly. For the previous Nepali residents, these symbols served to uphold and represent their upper-middle-class social status within local communities, marking a balanced blend of worldly success and religious devotion. However, within the *minsu* context, these symbols lose their role as markers of identity and status. As I observed, new guests arriving at the *minsu* are immediately drawn to these religious symbols. They photograph them, ponder their symbolic meanings, and inquire if it was Dai Wai who designed them. This is usually when Dai Wai begins recounting the tale of the *minsu*'s enigmatic owner's opulent lifestyle, using these stories to cater to the guests' curiosity, imagination, and desire for an exotic Nepali experience. These narratives typically follow a classic exotic trope, focusing on the extravagant lives of Oriental rajas and emperors.

Beyond the architectural foundation laid by the property owner, Dai Wai has put significant effort into enhancing the *minsu's* capability to provide a deeply immersive exotic experience for its residents. A large part of Dai Wai's daily responsibilities involves progressively moulding the *minsu*. The compound has nine rooms: eight for guests and one standard living room. The rooms are simply furnished with beds, chairs, and closets, most made from wood, bamboo, and iron to underscore an atmosphere of natural simplicity. Some of these items were recycled from a local junkyard, cleaned up, and repurposed by Dai Wai, who claims these pieces offer a nostalgic quality that modern manufactured furniture lacks.

The art adorning each guest room has been meticulously selected to offer guests a sense of exotic Nepal. This includes replicas of Buddhist mandalas and Thangka paintings. However, not all decorative pieces are strictly 'Nepali'. In one room, a modern artwork combining

Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man with a Sanskrit mantra sits opposite a Buddhist Thangka. Other items such as a dreamcatcher from Native American culture, a replica of Mughal paintings, and a dress from the Berber people of North Africa are used to decorate different rooms. While these items seem to dilute the 'authentic' Nepali essence, they re-emphasise a form of exoticism that is often equated to Nepaliness by the *minsu's* guests. This Nepaliness is then assimilated into a broader discourse on counter-modernity. Dai Wai often reorganises these decorations to keep the environment fresh and ever-changing.

Yet counter-modernity is just one facet of the *minsu's* material arrangement. These global symbols of exoticism construct a cosmopolitan ethos that serves to globalise the *minsu*. Set against a backdrop that is undeniably Nepali, the *minsu* offers a sense of cosmopolitan mobility in a stationary manner. In other words, despite being physically situated in Kathmandu, the *minsu* allows its residents to imagine, savour, and experience other parts of the world. For instance, a non-functioning, dust-covered jeep is parked in the compound's garden. Dai Wai would proudly relay its story to any curious visitors. The jeep, left behind by a previous guest who reportedly drove it all the way from London to Kathmandu, serves to weave the *minsu* into a grand narrative of global adventure. Dai Wai greatly admires such global adventures and the various forms of capital they bring. However, his reality starkly contrasts this narrative. Dai Wai is confined within the compound's walls, leading a mundane and unexciting life, even though he is residing in a country perceived as one of the most mysterious by many.

In a way, Dai Wai's *minsu* is akin to the "contact zone" concept described by James Clifford (1997) – a space where different cultures, spread across different times and places, are brought together and interact. But this contact zone is not equally accessible to all cultures. It is shaped and sustained by asymmetrical power dynamics that selectively include and interpret othered cultures. This leads to the question: within the *minsu*, who has the power to include and interpret other cultures?

Indeed, while Dai Wai serves as the frontline steward of the *minsu*, as many researchers like Fu et al. (2016) who focus on public tourist spaces of interaction point out, the power to claim, shape, and reshape spaces such as hostels is not solely in the hands of their builders and managers. In many instances, guests also play a substantial role in shaping the environment of these spaces in various ways, such as through graffiti, leaving personal belongings behind, and even directly participating in the space's (re)construction.

The same is true for Dai Wai's *minsu*. Beyond asking guests to leave books and souvenirs when they depart for their next destination, Dai Wai encourages guests with artistic talents or skills to physically leave their mark on the hostel. For example, an entire wall in one guest room is covered with a large ink painting that provides an abstract, panoramic view of Kathmandu, featuring local landmarks in a sketch-like form. This painting was created by a Chinese tourist who stayed in the room previously, in exchange for which Dai Wai waived their accommodation fee. This artwork has since become a permanent part of the *minsu's* decor and has significantly altered its visual atmosphere.

What strikes me about this mural is how closely it mirrors another larger wall painting in the lobby of Kathmandu's newly established five-star Marriott Hotel in terms of structure, the choice of Nepal's tourist landmarks, and the manner in which they are presented. This similarity raises questions about the homogenising power of global tourism capital, which determines what is worth seeing and what is not, and leads us to reconsider who truly has the power to shape the *minsu*.

Another potential power-holder is the *minsu's* Nepali manager and Dai Wai's local partner, Tenzin. Tenzin is a well-known Sherpa climber who, due to his remarkable feat of ascending Mt. Everest at a young age, was offered a full scholarship by the Chinese government to attend a prestigious Chinese university. There, he learnt Chinese and earned a degree in business management. After graduating, he returned to Nepal and established his own trekking and expedition company.

The emergence of a rapidly growing urban middle class in China has led to an influx of Chinese climbers into Nepal's climbing industry, all seeking to release their latent spirit of adventure and exploration on Nepal's towering peaks. As per the Himalayan Database (Hawley, n.d.), the number of successful Chinese climbers scaling Mount Everest has been on a steady rise - from 35 in 2016 to 63 in 2019. By 2020, China, with 450 successful summits, ranks fourth in the total number of Everest climbers, showcasing a significant leap within just five years. And it is not just about the hardcore climbers. An increasing number of Chinese tourists are also casually trekking in Nepal's renowned national parks. As a testament to this, on 13 April 2023, the first official group of Chinese tourists, comprising 180 trekkers, visited Nepal after a hiatus of about three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhou, 2023).

As an experienced professional climber with a deep history with China, Tenzin was naturally inclined to tap into this promising market. In addition to running his trekking company, he invested in the hostel as a comfortable place for his clients to stay while they were in Kathmandu. During my time there, I noticed that most of the guests were Tenzin's Chinese trekkers and climbers who used the *minsu* as their base before and after their mountaineering expeditions. Although Tenzin typically did not directly involve himself in the day-to-day operations of the *minsu*, his presence was felt profoundly, and his influences were manifest in every corner of the *minsu's* main building in the form of pictures and certificates. Whether it was the images of him conquering the highest peak on earth, meeting the former king of Nepal, or attending his graduation ceremony at a Chinese university, his remarkable journey was on display. On one hand, these pictures embed the *minsu* within the grand narrative of Nepal's modern adventure history and humanity at large by portraying an extraordinary individual. On the other hand, they also underscore the special and unique relationship that this hero shares with China.

In summary, I have shed light on how the material space of Dai Wai's *minsu* gradually took shape under the influence of multiple actors with varying interests. The creation of the *minsu* is not an instantaneous event but rather a prolonged process unfolding in its everyday life. More often than not, the construction of the house does not signify the end of work but marks the commencement of its life story. Different actors shape the *minsu*. This is why, as Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) point out, in addition to the house's material aspects, it is crucial to focus on its multiple social dimensions as well.

The analysis conducted thus far illuminates the process of how the materials of the *minsu* were produced, displaced, recycled, selected, installed, and removed. This occurs as diverse actors cause the establishment to traverse numerous cultural, social, and religious borders, with these processes primarily being daily and mundane in nature. Stated differently, while the establishment remains materially intact and static, it is continually created and re-created as a social production and a locus of value. This process is predominantly shaped and perpetuated when the social fields of the different insiders intersect, negotiate, condition, and challenge one another within the space. Simultaneously, the physical space also accommodates and conditions people's social space, capital, and identities. That is, while the *minsu* demarcates and shapes the identities of the relevant individuals, these individuals reciprocally mark and shape the identity of the *minsu*. The subsequent sections delve into this dialectical process

within the minsu, concentrating specifically on its Chinese and Nepali managers and exploring how they employ the same space to construct distinct identities and how this is intricately linked to their varying social fields.

As previously noted, Tenzin invested in the *minsu* business as an expansion and complement to his trekking enterprise. In line with almost all the Nepali tourism agents I engaged with, his primary motive was to realise tangible profits from the influx of Chinese tourists to Nepal, thus attracting more Chinese climbers and trekkers. Consequently, he sought a short-term return on his investment and anticipated rapid accumulation of more concrete forms of capital, such as cash. His strategy, to a certain degree, aligns with the Nepali state's development plan, which is heavily centred on material progress and reliant on foreign aid. For Tenzin, material capital held value, to some extent, to compensate for his relative scarcity of socio-economic capital and to elevate his marginalised social and cultural status within the Kathmandu Valley. The reputation he accrued at a young age, despite the substantial physical toll on his body, quickly dwindled over time. The economic accomplishments he had achieved did not substantially alter his social status in Kathmandu. For instance, his upward mobility within the capitalist class system is not necessarily transferrable to the local caste system. Furthermore, his position within the capitalist class system was not fixed but rather subject to change amidst competition not only within Kathmandu or Nepal, but also in broader transnational markets. Although largely dominated by Sherpa people, Nepal's climbing industry is fiercely competitive. Many climbing companies based in Thamel pose intense competition for Tenzin's business. Many of them employ Chinese staff or maintain close relationships with climbing and trekking agencies and clubs in China. Comparatively, Tenzin's business appears less systematic and isolated. Some of his Chinese business partners and customers have consistently critiqued Tenzin's approach to his business and his methods of organising activities for customers. They complained that Tenzin paid insufficient attention to the business, lacked vision and initiative, constantly altered plans, and failed to deliver promised services. In many instances, Tenzin's apparent indifference towards the business is summarised by these Chinese individuals as being "characteristically Nepali."

In addition to serving as a location where Tenzin sought to consolidate his material capital, the *minsu* also played a crucial role in enhancing his social connections. As a person of considerable repute in his village, Tenzin is bound by a sense of duty to assist his fellow villagers, such as facilitating their livelihoods in Kathmandu. To an extent, the *minsu*

periodically serves as the nexus of Tenzin's original hometown community within Kathmandu, where individuals occasionally drop in to assist with minor tasks or gather to celebrate festivals. For a period, the garden of the *minsu* was transformed into an outdoor café under the supervision of a young boy, alleged to be Tenzin's cousin.

In general, as an extension of Tenzin's social spaces within Kathmandu, the *minsu* accommodated the anxieties, aspirations, challenges, and potentialities of his personal life and business. The *minsu* can be perceived as a tactical endeavour of Tenzin, intended to navigate grounded and structural socio-economic constraints by capitalising on the burgeoning transnational currents and enhancing the mobilisation of his reputation and capital in transnational circulations. However, Tenzin's spatial tactics with the *minsu* were not entirely successful, with its operation lasting only around two years. Although the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the *minsu*, I propose that its demise was more inherent and structural, likely instigated by the asymmetries between various transnational and local social spaces cohabiting in the same physical space. In other words, as these grounded and structural local issues were mobilised in transnational circulations, they were not alleviated or resolved, but rather complicated and entangled when encountering other problems originating from different contexts. To comprehend how this process could have unfolded, we should first explore some narratives related to another significant participant in the *minsu*, Dai Wai.

Dai Wai was in his 40s when I encountered him in Kathmandu. He grew up in a middle-class, perhaps even affluent family, not due to their financial earnings, but because his father held a position in local government overseeing material supplies. However, Dai Wai rejected institutional life, instead choosing to seek his fortune in the more liberal market. Much of his adult life was characterised by instability. He transitioned through numerous jobs, some of which brought him substantial wealth, while others cost him the gains he had painstakingly accrued. As he candidly confessed to me, "Zezhou, in my entire life, I have not spent a single day in routine work. My life has been full of ups and downs."

Despite not being an artistic practitioner himself, Dai Wai demonstrated a passionate interest in various forms of art. His aesthetic preference was dominated by arts of eye-catching representational expressions of unique ideas, rather than the validity of the ideas themselves. Through a myriad professional and personal connections, he formed friendships with numerous artists, practitioners, and curators. To a large extent, his fervour for the arts led him to Nepal and anchored him there for approximately two years.

The acquaintance between Dai Wai and Tenzin was established in 2018 when an outdoor gear brand invited Tenzin to China. It was on this occasion that they encountered each other and swiftly became friends. Dai Wai quickly recognised the potential appeal and marketability of Tenzin, identifying elements that could be converted into substantial cultural and financial capital in the Chinese market, based on his assessment. Simultaneously, Tenzin was in search of a Chinese partner, mirroring the tactics of many of his Nepali competitors. In line with his consistent working pattern, and specifically inspired by China's burgeoning *Wanghong* economy — an alternative online ecosystem and market that seemingly offers ordinary individuals swift access to wealth and success (Craig et al., 2021) — Dai Wai discerned considerable potential in Tenzin, and hence decided to join him in Kathmandu.

In this regard, Dai Wai's transnational motivations and tactics were not dissimilar to those of the Vloggers analysed in Chapter Four. All were driven by the desire to capitalise on the rising tide of the internet economy, hoping to mobilise their limited capital through transnational flows across diverse physical and virtual spaces. However, compared to these Vloggers, Dai Wai embarked on his venture with significantly more support in terms of spatial resources, financial capital, and social relations. Yet, Dai Wai's transnational mobility was relatively low-end and grounded, tending to be fragmented and navigating through the gaps among various state radars and policies, facilitated by numerous tactics within ambiguous grey zones. For instance, to maintain his stay in Nepal at a minimal cost, Dai Wai arrived in the country on a tourist visa. Subsequently, he enlisted a Kathmandu-based agent to assist him in applying for a student visa, associated with Nepali language courses at Tribhuvan University[15].

For both Tenzin and Dai Wai, particularly for the latter, the *minsu* served as a site of compromise and tactical manoeuvres. While Tenzin secured a Chinese *minsu* caretaker who could accommodate Chinese tourists, Dai Wai harboured grander ambitions. Although, like Tenzin, Dai Wai also employed the entire *minsu* as a spatial tactic, the structural and grounded challenges he sought to address differed from Tenzin's. To a large extent, since these issues were rooted in different fields, they were non-transferable. While Dai Wai envisaged the *minsu* as a transient and liminal space to legitimise his temporary presence in Nepal and provide some necessary income for his grander plans, Tenzin was, for the most part, content with Dai Wai's

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[15] It is quite intriguing that when Dai Wai first mentioned his academic situation to me, he was incorrect about both the university he was attending and the course he was enrolled in. He believed he was studying an English language course at Kathmandu University, rather than the actual Nepali language courses at Tribhuvan University.

de facto role as the *minsu's* caretaker. After the conclusion of their initial 'honeymoon' period, each gradually grew discontented with the other. Dai Wai was exasperated by Tenzin's reluctance to collaborate on his large-scale projects, accusing him of being short-sighted and antiquated. Simultaneously, Tenzin began to question his decision to invite Dai Wai to Nepal. He saw little potential in Dai Wai's proposed projects and distrusted the associated connections. Overall, he viewed the resources invested in these ventures as wasteful, detracting from Dai Wai's primary responsibility as the *minsu's* caretaker, a role in which he had not performed well. As far as my observations suggest, the *minsu's* business was not particularly robust. Dai Wai did not devote substantial attention to the *minsu's* operations. Instead, he expended a considerable amount of time and energy developing his larger-scale projects. Intriguingly, he never explicitly elaborated on the nature of these projects or how they might function. He only ambitiously lamented that he had already secured several contacts in China, and Tenzin had declined to participate.

The notion of waste re-emerges within another transnational compound, acting as a significant driver of internal debates. In the expatriate's compound previously analysed, the Chinese manager condemned the Nepali staff's resting during working hours as wasteful, while the latter employed this resting time and space as a tactical method of resistance. Conversely, in the *minsu*, Tenzin voiced concern over Dai Wai squandering resources that should have been allocated to the *minsu* business, while Dai Wai felt frustrated about Tenzin's perceived wastage of opportunities for larger achievements. Clearly, the varied conceptualisations of value, or rather what should not be wasted, significantly contributed to these debates.

It is crucial to note that these debates, as is often the case, do not yield definitive winners or losers. Underneath the overt issue of waste is a constant affirmation and re-affirmation of power, which emerges following the collision of different social fields within the same space. Thus, these debates concern less the notions of right or wrong, and more the power dynamics within these spaces. In the contemporary discourse on Nepal-China relations, China and the Chinese are consistently portrayed as sponsors, proponents, and definers—in essence, the holders of power. While such an overarching imbalance might indeed exist in broader interactional spaces, it would be imprudent to uncritically transpose this macro-level power dynamic into specific micro-domains. As previously analysed, even in spaces like the expatriate worker compounds, where power is seemingly monopolised by a handful of Chinese individuals, other members

still retain their own space, time, and power for resistance. Within the *minsu*, these macro-level inequalities are notably subverted to a greater extent.

Representing the Chinese/dominant side, Dai Wai finds himself in a disadvantaged position within the *minsu*, reliant on Tenzin, who represents the Nepali/subordinate side. Despite being ostensibly partners, an imbalance exists between them in terms of personal capabilities, resources, and connections with local or transnational society. This dynamic positions Dai Wai more as a Chinese manager employed by Tenzin in the *minsu*. While he manages the day-to-day operations, his life in Nepal is deeply dependent—directly or indirectly—on Tenzin's assistance. However, within the homestay, Dai Wai exerts significant power over its arrangement. For instance, if he expresses disapproval of the café run by Tenzin's cousin in the homestay garden, he can request Tenzin to discontinue the service and find alternative employment for his cousin. Dai Wai has ample justification for exercising this power. As the actual operator of the *minsu*, he fears that Nepali college students—who may only purchase a single cup of coffee in an entire afternoon—could disrupt the serene atmosphere of the *minsu*, potentially disturbing other guests. The underlying issue, however, is that Dai Wai detests Tenzin's business model of informally providing jobs for relatives and friends, viewing it as outdated, non-modern, and unsustainable. Additionally, he regards Tenzin's cousins as lazy, unreliable, untrustworthy, and suspects them of involvement in several thefts. If these flaws were previously tolerable, Dai Wai would feel the need to assert his remaining power within the homestay by 'correcting' these flaws, particularly after Tenzin consistently declined to partake in his significant projects.

Dai Wai's demands, while potentially straining Tenzin's social relationships to some extent, are justified in a way that makes outright refusal difficult for Tenzin. Consequently, Tenzin relocates the café and finds alternate work for his cousin. These partial victories, although extending Dai Wai's control over the *minsu*, do not fundamentally alter the power dynamics between him and Tenzin. Contrarily, the minor conflicts leading to these victories recur, prompting Tenzin to consider whether he should continue tolerating Dai Wai or potentially sever their relationship entirely by closing the *minsu*. The outcome was that, during a dinner party that I and several Chinese tourists attended, Tenzin publicly criticised Dai Wai, admonishing him not to interfere in his affairs, especially following Dai Wai's anxious commentary on Tenzin's perceived lack of understanding in maintaining relationships with Chinese customers. Subsequently, Dai Wai confided to me, "Tenzin looks down on me now

because I haven't fulfilled my initial promises to him—he thinks I am boasting. I will achieve it one day; I can't let him look down on me."

Dai Wai's self-esteem and perseverance hint at an underlying sense of inferiority due to his limited capital to maintain his social space at that time. Indeed, the inferiority emerging from limited capital results in a range of behavioural responses, while the same reasons contribute to these behaviours' failure, further diminishing his already scarce capital. Upon his arrival in Nepal, though he lacked significant economic capital, he had confidence in his expansive connections in China, his wide-ranging vision, and his sharp market insights—in essence, his ability to circulate and convert into other forms of capital globally. In contrast, while Tenzin possesses various forms of tangible capital in Nepal, China, and other parts of the world, Dai Wai views these as insignificant, at least until they are bolstered by his advanced abilities. Initially, Dai Wai envisages a common field, guided by his forward-thinking ideas and connections, connecting markets worldwide, primarily the Chinese market. If Tenzin's or Nepal's local resources are adequately introduced into this field, they could circulate and increase autonomously within its mature system.

At this juncture, some readers may question what Dai Wai stands to gain from this process, touching on his personal motivation. Somewhat paradoxically, Dai Wai, particularly in the early stages, places less emphasis on the accumulation of tangible forms of capital, such as money. Instead, he values more abstract forms of capital, such as the creation of the transnational market system itself, and deeply enjoys his role as a significant player in the process. As will be addressed shortly, Dai Wai had various plans involving Tenzin, the *minsu,* and Nepal, some of which I was involved with to differing extents. He consistently emphasised to me that even if his ventures resulted in financial loss, the primary objective was the promotion of this interactive system. The experiences, sense of achievement, and accumulated social relationships he garnered from participating in these exchange systems' formation are the capital he values—the markers of his identity. They symbolise high mobility and expansive connections, essential indicators of success within a high-end globalised context. Therefore, when we first met and he hesitated to identify himself as a homestay manager, he felt a sense of inferiority as it could symbolise a static daily life, suggesting an unsuccessful existence.

Contrary to Dai Wai's vision of a borderless, swiftly flowing, autonomous, and pure transnational field, the boundaries of the field in the actual contact zone can be quite robust, and the flow of capital is subject to various conditions, sometimes slow and hesitant. If Dai

Wai fails to meet Tenzin's expectations for him at the *minsu*—specifically, generating cash by hosting more Chinese tourists—and instead disrupts Tenzin's original social space by implementing his plans and impeding Tenzin's arrangements for his cousin, Tenzin may find it difficult to support Dai Wai's plans or allow his accumulated capital to flow into the space envisioned by Dai Wai. Even if this scheme may prove feasible and ultimately profitable, it does not align with Tenzin's immediate circumstances.

Simultaneously, Dai Wai has underestimated the challenge of mobilising transnational capital to cross the boundaries of various fields and circulate. Though he envisaged promoting Tenzin through the network, a traditionally borderless transnational virtual space, he did not anticipate that the process would be more complex than merely posting a tweet, a TikTok video, or a Weibo post. A significant flow of people, objects, and information would be needed to facilitate this potentiality, all of which required specific on-the-ground agents for implementation. I had the opportunity to serve as one such agent, which provided a deeper understanding of the gap between Dai Wai's high-end globalisation vision and his reality, which is more akin to low-end globalisation.

After our initial meeting, Dai Wai invited me to participate in his plan to host a poster exhibition themed on Nepal's Holi festival. The Holi festival, a Hindu festival that has gained popularity not only in South Asia but also gradually in urban areas worldwide, has garnered the enthusiasm of many individuals not originating from religious or South Asian backgrounds (for a more comprehensive discussion of this festival's various cultural contexts, please refer to (Crooke, 1914; Kaufmann, 1962; Vickery, 1976). Known globally as the festival of colours, Holi is depicted in the global media as featuring carnival-like gatherings, vibrant colours, jovial music, and radiant smiles. The concept of transforming the religious festival into transnational cultural products is not unique to Dai Wai. Prior to him, countless postcards, paintings, pictures, and posters have been created and disseminated among global consumers.

Regrettably, beyond proposing the format of a poster exhibition, Dai Wai was unable to provide a concrete, detailed plan for its execution. His understanding of the background of Holi was almost non-existent, his limited knowledge only stemming from vague snippets of information found online. He approached Holi, Hinduism, and Nepali culture with the typical exoticism of an outsider. When asked about the exploitable and sellable aspects he saw in Holi, his answers were simply "unique", "rare", and "seldom seen in China". In alienating Nepali culture, he also positioned China within a context of advanced, universal, experienced, and template-forming

industry, as he told me numerous times, "As long as we get it started, it would be very easy. In China, we have hosted so many amazing exhibitions. This one will not be a problem."

Yet, transplanting his "successful" and "advanced" Chinese experiences to Nepal was not straightforward. Limited by his abilities, minimal capital, and social status, he was unable to mobilise sufficient resources to facilitate the project's execution. Besides Tenzin or a few Chinese-speaking business people in Thamel, he had no other local contacts. His personal scholarship and ability was limited. Unable to articulate the potential commercial value of Holi or Nepali culture to his friends in China, he failed to secure their effective support.

His personal identity was also continuously questioned. Once, when he commissioned a Nepali agency to introduce some local resources, the agent's first question, after hearing Dai Wai's introductions, was "then if I approach these Nepalese professors on your behalf, how should I introduce you to them? A *minsu* keeper?" I had asked Dai Wai the same question before, and he had asked himself the same one even earlier. On many occasions, Dai Wai expressed his disappointment that his identity as a *minsu* keeper prevented him from realising the event, saying, "how should I introduce myself to those people, the homestay keeper? No one will take me seriously." Lacking effective, qualified, recognised, and functional agents, Dai Wai's Holi project ended at the brainstorming stage, even though there might exist a massive demand for such a market in China - we have no way of knowing. As we continuously narrate the immense power of global intrusion, Dai Wai's story reminds us that these formidable forces do not operate in a vacuum and require concrete agents to give them form. Their strength also depends on the energy, social networks, and social capital of these individual agents, which cannot be entirely dissociated from geographical constraints (Martin, 2017).

Dai Wai's ambitious plan to link his personal social space, his social network, and Nepal's cultural resources through his *minsu* as an intermediary hub met with almost total failure. He also attempted to transform the *minsu* into a base that could support resident artists. However, during its brief existence, it only welcomed one young artist, who also happened to be a Buddhist. The artist eventually had a falling out with Dai Wai due to the *minsu's* inability to provide basic material support. After this, Dai Wai turned to a more economical approach, one with virtually no cost, to modify the space and meaning of the *minsu*.

Dai Wai was captivated by locally produced bricks - not special artistically crafted bricks, but standard red clay bricks used for construction that littered the streets of Kathmandu. What

intrigued him was the raw, uncomplicated quality of these bricks and the various symbols that had been burnt into each one. These symbols, originally used for identification and denoting the bricks' respective factories, took the form of Nepali or English letters, and Hindu and Buddhist icons. Dai Wai interpreted and appreciated these symbols as authentic artwork of Nepali locality, springing from the grassroots level of local daily life.

The bricks he had were all collected from Kathmandu's street corners. Some were brand new, straight from construction sites, while others were broken and abandoned on the roads. Dai Wai displayed these collected red bricks in the *minsu's* garden, creating a sizable mosaic-like area. He even converted some bricks into meme. Possibly Dai Wai's favourite interaction with the *minsu's* guests was introducing these bricks to curious visitors, explaining their value and his plan to commercialise them as artworks from Nepal. He still harbours the dream that one day he can transform Nepal's ordinary red bricks into significant cultural and creative products in China.

The *minsu* survived for approximately two years. Its demise was in part legitimised by the COVID-19 pandemic. After returning to China, Dai Wai invested in a pub in his hometown. Tenzin, on the other hand, found another Chinese partner and somehow managed to establish a presence on Chinese social media to promote Nepal's climbing industry. From certain perspectives, the *minsu* is not entirely dead but continues to exist in another form - the asymmetric, transnational connections it fostered continue to pulsate, and countless agents are still waiting for their share in the resulting waves.

Conclusion

Attempting to answer the question of how asymmetrical powers in the contact zone are manifested, fixed, negotiated, reshaped, and challenged, this chapter turns its attention to the 'immobile' aspects of the contact zone. The exploration is directed towards the contact zone's various spatial and material contexts. In conclusion, this chapter presents an exploration of the lived experiences of individuals within distinct yet interconnected spaces in Kathmandu: the urban area of Thamel, a compound managed by a Chinese State-owned Enterprise, and a trans-local *minsu*. Each of these spaces serves as a contact zone where the dynamics of asymmetrical power are complex.

Thamel, a bustling urban tourist epicentre, presents an intriguing contact zone where power is fixed and contested through the socioeconomic enclave model of a Chinatown. However, the

experiences of Chinese individuals in Thamel expose a negotiation and challenge to this power, as they grapple with issues of authenticity and identity, and wrestle with unmet expectations and contested mobility motivations. The compound, with its diverse inhabitants, exemplifies how power is negotiated through control over essential supplies and is disputed through interpersonal relationships. The everyday politics within the compound, shaped by varying degrees of social, economic, and cultural capital, mirror larger societal structures and hierarchies, such as the universalised mindsets of modernity and capitalist efficiency. Nonetheless, these power dynamics are ceaselessly challenged and renegotiated. The very spaces that facilitate control and hierarchy also serve various individuals' tactical resistance. The *minsu*, a trans-local guesthouse, offers a unique contact zone where power is complicated by a nexus of global tourism, the construction of Nepal as a significant tourist destination, and individual pursuits of modern identity. The constant renegotiation and challenging processes through the *minsu* lead to fluid and contested power dynamics.

How might these complex spatial power dynamics contribute to re-evaluating new knowledge in Nepali Studies? Firstly, these transnational spaces, when they transform into transnational places within (or beyond) the contact zone by being positioned in different power scalars, and thus being endowed with various meanings, become knowledge themselves. They not only provide the material for knowledge production but also become the direct, smaller areas for many people to conceptualise larger ones. Moreover, the materials asymmetrically offered by these spaces are crucial for the knowledge-making process in the contact zone. Money, people, products, and power, in general, transculturation, find their concrete forms in these transnational places. These spatialised concrete forms facilitate, enhance, mediate, contest, hinder, and even stop the transcultural flows. In essence, they spatialise knowledge and provide spaces for knowledge as well. Lastly, new knowledge in Nepali Studies also creates new places, reshapes current ones, and eliminates old ones within the contact zone, both physically and imaginatively. It is precisely the dialectical dynamics between knowledge-making and spaces that make a spatial investigation an inseparable part of this thesis.

In the next chapter, the last analytical segment of this thesis, I return to the mobile aspects of the contact zone. I investigate a new pattern of commercial mobility, as well as a new form of direct contact through the old Himalayan entrepôt, *daigou*. Why would such individualistic trans-Himalayan contact emerge? Who are the relevant actors? How is it connected with the broader socioeconomic and cultural contexts of the contact zone? More specifically, I explore

these questions in the current context of not only the Nepal-China contact zone but also of the wider world during the COVID-19 pandemic. This period offers a unique opportunity for a sharp investigation of the conditions for mobility, immobility, and knowledge production.

Chapter Eight Old Entrepot and New Trans-Himalayan Mobility Patterns[16]

"New fresh *yarsagumba*[17]!

In the past, the horses were slow; thus, we could only have dried *yarsagumba*

Now SF express runs fast; thus, we can have fresh *yarsagumba*

…

Fresh yarsagumba keeps love fresh!

(Accompanied by a video in which a *yarsagumba* stands on the grassland against a snowy mountain in the distant background)"
(WeChat *daigou* post ,Bro Kang, 2023a)

"Nepali cashmere cardigan

made of the fur of highland chirus

(Accompanied by pictures that show the animal, cashmere products and women wearing cardigans; geographic tag: Nepal, Kathmandu)"
(WeChat *daigou* post, Bro Kang, 2023b)

"On-site Thangka painting

every Thangka

dedicated work of the painters

(Accompanied by a short video in which a Nepali painter is drawing the Thangka, sitting on the floor; geographic tag: Nepal, Kathmandu, Kathesimbu Stupa)" (WeChat *daigou* post, Bro Kang, 2023c)

"Nepal: Introducing Khukuri for your information

The Gorkhali military blade, Kukuri, also known as the blade of the shape of dog's leg, is not only the national blade of Nepal, but also the symbol of honour of Gorkha soldiers…

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[16] Some parts of this chapter are modified and collected in an article published in *The German Journal on Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 162/163, 77-94.

[17] *Yarsagumba* is a Tibetan-rendered name in the Nepali language. It is known in English as caterpillar fungus and *dong chong xia cao* in Chinese. *Yarsagumba* parasitizes the larvae of moths and turns them into caterpillar corpse (Fisher, 2017). They are highly valued as natural, traditional medicine.

With the blade, Gorkha soldiers earned their reputation for bravery and endurance. Wherever they go, the blades grasped in their hands automatically tell their identities

(Accompanied by two pictures in which Gorkha soldiers are with Khukuri)" (Excerpt from a long *daigou* post, Happiness Zou, 2023a)

"Made-in-India 4U hair serum 60ml (new edition)

Main treatment: Baldness, postpartum hair loss, seborrheic hair loss, hereditary hair loss…

(Accompanied by a promotion picture)" (WeChat *daigou* post, Happiness Zou, 2023b)

Subsequent excerpts exemplify commercial endeavours on WeChat, a mainstream Chinese social media platform. The posts showcase a variety of Nepali and Indian commodities intended for a Chinese consumer base. They are authored by Chinese daigouers who met during fieldwork in Nepal.

Predominantly young Chinese, these daigouers routinely travel to Nepal and other South Asian countries for their business ventures. Their typical stays in Kathmandu span several weeks or months. They spend their days patronising local stores, selecting products for their Chinese clientele, and networking with other daigouers and Nepali partners. Kathmandu's Thamel district, an emerging hotspot for Chinese tourists, caters to most of their commercial and personal needs. As these daigouers deepen their ties within the city and Thamel becomes increasingly crowded with Chinese traders, many seek alternative locales within and outside the urban expanse. Alongside their physical locations, virtual spaces such as social media and online streaming platforms play a critical role in their daily operations. Here, they frequently post commercial promotions and snapshots of their travels, maintaining rapport with current and potential customers while presenting themselves as experienced, resourceful, and reliable business individuals. This blend of physical and virtual trajectories, reality and virtuality, creates a coherent, functional, and meaningful space that allows *daigou* to thrive.

The concept of *daigou*, as an embodiment of low-end globalisation and characterised by informal on-ground interactions between Nepal and China, has been cursorily addressed in preceding chapters. Nonetheless, what remains lacking in the discussion thus far is a

comprehensive ethnographic description of specific actors' mobile practices, their motivations, and their networks of (im)mobilities. Additionally, the process of making sense of these (im)mobile experiences warrants further investigation. Thus, adhering to the new mobilities paradigm, which "attempts to account for not only the quickening of liquidity … but also the concomitant patterns of concentration that create zones of connectivity, centrality, and empowerment …, and of disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility …" (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 210), I redirect my attention towards an ethnographic exploration of how Chinese daigouers strive for upward social mobility. They do so by mobilising their bodies, capitalising on limited information, and merchandising products. My exploration distinctly focuses on the sale of medical masks to China during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this unusual yet fleeting moment, when almost all the normal functions of the Nepal-China contact zone were impaired, *daigou* mobility—predominantly the sale of medical masks back to China—managed to persist for a while. This gave rise to a type of "shock mobility" (Xiang, 2021), a reflexive response to the turmoil of the contact zone; it was transitory, unmasking the vulnerability of the contact zone's seemingly normal everyday life.

More broadly, and from an empirical standpoint, the focus on *daigou* in this chapter is informed by its transformative and articulating attributes. Simply put, my fieldwork observations suggest that nearly every Chinese individual I have encountered in Nepal is engaged in *daigou* activities to varying degrees. Its pervasive presence in the lives of Chinese residents in Nepal and its link to many other non-commercial facets of life make it an invaluable tool for investigating on-the-ground daily life in the Nepal-China contact zone. Moreover, its incorporation into the transnational everyday life of many people qualifies it as a form of culture. An inquiry into the power dynamics that shape and sustain this cultural (trans)formation redirects us to the primary investigation of this thesis—Asian people's structured and hierarchical notions of modernity, development, and globalisation. By participating in *daigou* in foreign countries, different participants are affirming and reaffirming their positions in the modern world and their relations with the rest of the world.

In one instance, I accompanied Chinese workers in Kathmandu's Bhatbhateni supermarket as they purchased gifts for their families prior to their departure home. After purchasing many products labelled as 'Nepali', one individual unexpectedly selected some toothpaste from the shelf and placed it in the shopping basket. Intrigued, I queried why the toothpaste was deemed

a special gift. The worker responded that it was intended for his young daughter—a product from a renowned Western company that was not officially available in China's market. He used to have people buy this toothpaste from Australia, and he was pleasantly surprised to find these 'valuable' products randomly stacked on a shelf in an ordinary Nepali supermarket.

To fully comprehend the contemporary trans-Himalayan *daigou* culture, it is crucial to place it within the historical context of trans-Himalayan trade trajectories. To a large extent, Nepal's geographical 'disadvantage'- being a landlocked country-is automatically translated into a unidirectional historical timeline, positioning the country in a disadvantaged, backward historical place, intertwined with dominant notions such as development and modernity. Chinese daigouers and their customers often infer that this region hosts an immature and undeveloped market, which is less institutionalised, situated at a lower level within the global supply chain, and more profitable due to the 'raw' products available. This presumption of a primitive market allows daigouers, though often equipped with limited resources, to exploit the 'backward' and 'less mobile' local market through their connections with and experience in more advanced, globalised markets. To sum up, the hierarchical modern experience, subjectively perceived by many, is a significant factor underpinning the contemporary trans-Himalayan *daigou* mobility.

Embodied in daigouers and their customers' modern subjectivities that relegate Nepal as a backward and isolated market is the normalised, colonialism-rooted, and Western-dominated process of globalisation. This process epistemologically denies various local, regional, and trans-border trajectories. However, if we were to explore these local trajectories, we would discern that historically, Nepal—especially Kathmandu—has never been isolated. Instead, it has functioned as an entrepot or trade centre (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1978; Lewis, 1996; Liechty, 2010; Martin, 1998; Pant, 1964; Rose, 1971) in the broader South and East Asia, let alone the Himalayas. The exchange of numerous commercial goods has been accompanied by the movement of religions, diplomacy, customs, knowledge, refugees, and even wars, all of which connect Nepal to other parts of the world.

In 1964, in response to India's accusation that the Chinese-funded Kodari Road was a conduit for spreading Chinese communism from the North, Nepal's former King Mahendra rebutted that his objective was to revitalise the ancient trade route to Tibet and reinstate Nepal's historical status as an entrepot for the Central Asian hinterland (The New York Times, 1964).

Trade between Nepal and Tibet has historically been a dynamic facet of life for people residing in the Himalayan borderlands, even before borders were defined in modern terms (Fisher, 1987; Fürer-Haimendorf, 1975). The Newar people from the Kathmandu Valley even had the privilege of engaging in commercial activities in Tibet, and maintained settlements for hundreds of years (Bista, 1978; Lewis, 1993).

The earliest records of trade between Nepal and mainland China that I have come across are those of the Nepali quinquennial missions to Qing China from the end of the 18th century to the early 20th century. The two Nepal-Tibet Wars that took place at the end of the 18th century have been discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Yet, the post-war arrangements between the Gorkha Kingdom, Tibet, and the Qing Empire of China remain unaddressed. As the 'victor' of the war, Qing China demanded tributes from Nepal and required missions to be sent directly to Beijing every five years. Since 1866, the Nepali mission delegation had two objectives for embarking on these dangerous journeys—beyond the diplomatic aim, the delegation was also there to trade Nepali goods in mainland China. These goods, primarily textiles, spices, and other unique products, belonged predominantly to the Rana family and their close associates (Manandhar, 2001). Among the traded goods was also opium, the profitable sales of which in China could have motivated the Nepali rulers of that era to initiate unnecessary missions to China (Manandhar, 1999). Beyond these trades masquerading as diplomatic missions, there are no other historical records of trade relations between Nepal and China, let alone instances of Chinese individuals (who are not of Tibetan ethnicity) conducting commercial activities in Nepal.

In spite of the vibrant local and trans-regional trajectories of interaction—commercial or otherwise—they have been systematically marginalised and superseded by the more recent and ostensibly 'alien' paradigms of globalisation. These paradigms have precipitated a shift in the centres of discursive and experiential interaction from the Himalayan region to the West. However, within this framework of globalisation, it is essential to recognise that Nepal has never been in a state of isolation or infrastructural modernity deficit. A wealth of historiographical research illustrates the intricate interplay between Nepal, China, and Britain during the colonial era (e.g. Lamb, 1964, 1960; Mishra, 1991). Furthermore, Nepal, at different junctures in history, has served as a crucial node within international commodity distribution networks. A case in point would be the 1980s when residents of Nepal had access to Video

Cassette Recorders (VCRs) containing Hollywood blockbusters prior to their official releases in American theatres (Liechty, 2010).

Consequently, even though the majority of participants in *daigou* activities may fail to recognise it, their current engagements are not entirely novel or modern, but rather a continuation of an established historical tradition tied to the function of the old entrepot—a hub of local goods, people, currency, and globalising flows. The ahistorical attitudes of pertinent actors towards this historical entrepot do not necessarily detract from its historical authenticity or significance.

The Transnational Flow of Chinese Tourism and the (im)Mobility of *Daigou*

I posit that the recent mobility of *daigou*, like other forms of contemporary mobilities delineated earlier, is inextricably linked to the tourist flow. The infrastructures and networks fostered by this tourist flow are not exclusively beneficial to tourists alone. These established pathways and amenities, initially intended to serve tourists, are also exploited by other entities, including daigouers. Consequently, the transnational flow of Chinese tourism moulds the mobility of *daigou* practices.

Pinpointing the exact inception of Chinese *daigou* in Nepal is challenging, primarily due to the discrete, unofficial, and nebulous nature of *daigou* mobility, a characteristic feature of low-end globalisation. Generally, *daigou* refers to a grassroots, grounded, alternative form of transnational mobility, the supply chains and logistics of which rely heavily on individuals' corporeal labour (Xie, 2018)—for example, personal suitcases may be used to transport products, or items like smartphones may be secured to one's body using adhesive tapes. In December 2016, Nepali Times reported on how Chinese daigouers leveraged internet platforms such as WeChat and Taobao to sell Nepali handicrafts in China following the cessation of face-to-face trade due to the 2015 earthquake (Tian and Lan, 2016). The report estimated the presence of around 100 Chinese daigouers in Nepal dealing in popular product categories like Buddha statues, Thangkas, Bodhi Citta beads, wood carvings, and silver accessories.

The state-sanctioned tourism exchange between Nepal and China presents daigouers with a legal and manageable identity for overseas travel. During my fieldwork, all the daigouers I interacted with held tourist visas. In 2015, Nepal waived visa fees for Chinese citizens. Though

this tourist visa is originally valid only for 30 days, it can be renewed up to 180 days with minimal additional expense. Moreover, this visa does not restrict the holder from participating in non-tourist activities like *daigou*. However, their clandestine identity under the guise of tourism necessitates that these endeavours remain low-profile to avoid state scrutiny. To conduct these unofficial activities, daigouers typically inhabit marginal areas with minimal state regulation or protection. In Kathmandu, many daigouers operate within the city's grey zone (Marginson, 2012), Thamel, where the tourist flow further sustains the mobility of *daigou* by embedding daigouers within the material-infrastructure facilities intended for tourist use. The Chinese "moorings" (Hannam et al., 2006) prove integral for daigouers' "spatial unfixing of work" (Graham et al., 2017). Many daigouers I encountered rented rooms in budget hotels operated by Chinese investors. These spaces serve dual purposes—places of rest and temporary storage facilities for products prior to their delivery to express-service dropoff points or transport to the airport. Those daigouers not residing in Thamel still dedicate significant time there for the acquisition of goods and the cultivation of relationships with storeowners, peers, and friends in shops, cafés, and restaurants. An aspect of this predilection for Thamel is that many daigouers lack the basic linguistic, economic, and cultural skills to navigate areas beyond this district. The flow of tourism, in embedding daigouers within Nepal's material tourist spaces, links them with social networks mediated by Chinese-speaking local brokers. These individuals, either unable to secure licensed employment in the formal tourist market or keen to extend their formal businesses to the informal *daigou* milieu, establish invaluable social capital (Burt, 1992), facilitating subsequent opportunities.

The recent surge in online streaming activities in Thamel stores further exemplifies how *daigou* is entrenched in touristic material and social spaces. During my recent fieldwork, I noted that many stores, bustling with Chinese individuals, were predominantly occupied by daigouers rather than typical tourists. These daigouers employed advanced real-time communication technologies to advertise their products. Using popular digital platforms, particularly *Douyin* (TikTok) and *Kuaishou*, they showcased in-store items to prospective customers in China. Nepali storeowners or staff occasionally appeared on-screen, usually greeting potential customers in Chinese. In permitting daigouers to use their spaces and resources, Nepali owners potentially broadened their business reach into China's extensive markets. The ordering process is near-instantaneous; Chinese customers can place their orders online while watching the live streaming. Once orders are placed, the products are carefully packaged and taken to nearby express-service dropoff points for distribution across China.

These virtual conduits also offer fundamental financial infrastructures. *Daigou* is an emerging digital entrepreneurship form, a significant bottom-up force stimulating the digital economy (Yu, 2017). This growth is tied to internet technologies that enable relatively marginalised and vulnerable agents with less capital to achieve mobility and capital accumulation, bypassing some level of official regulation and exploitation. Both Nepali businessmen and Chinese daigouers in Kathmandu prefer digital payments over Nepali rupee cash transactions. These digital payments allow for undetected money transfers between Nepali recipients and Chinese payers, rendering the funds tax-free. Although the Nepali government has attempted to control these transactions (Himalayan News Service, 2020; Sharma, 2019; The Himalayan Times, 2019), my fieldwork suggests that the usage of Chinese digital payments persisted among Chinese individuals and between Chinese and Nepali people, even during the official ban period. Businesses in Thamel, such as stores, hotels, restaurants, and travel agencies, readily accepted transactions via Alipay and WeChat Pay. For those Chinese visitors requiring substantial quantities of rupee cash, Chinese currency exchange brokers were readily available, with transactions conducted via a simple click on a smartphone.

Online streaming has emerged as a linchpin in daigouers' authentication strategies for the commercial products they purvey. An increasing body of academic literature on *daigou* underscores the paramount importance of branding practices, defined as the adroit fusion of idiosyncratic individual personalities and lived experiences with commercial products, achieved via visual and discursive narratives (Zhang, 2017). These practices have been demonstrated to significantly bolster customer attraction, enhance customer retention (or stickiness), and augment overall profit margins. Furthermore, as (Zhao, 2021) delineates, through the judicious deployment of WeChat's timeline service, Chinese students are able to dissolve the boundary between personal and professional networks, thereby facilitating the cultivation and expansion of relationships with *daigou* customers within China—many of whom they may never encounter face-to-face.

This manifestation of branding practices can be considered spatialised, with the mobility of *daigou* pivoting around distinct geographic anchors wherein the authenticity of a locale is cemented through its association with specific products. Within Chinese perceptions, for instance, Europe is indelibly associated with luxury goods of a high-end nature, while Australia and New Zealand are inextricably linked to health-oriented items and powdered formulas.

Nepal, conversely, is associated with goods such as handmade cashmere scarves and Buddhist handicrafts. These associations not only perpetuate a form of internal Orientalism among many Chinese individuals but also reinforce the perception of Nepal as simultaneously a sacred Buddhist land and a less-industrialised nation. However, for the establishment of authenticity, the physical presence of daigouers within the source market remains a critical precondition.

The process of authenticating various local markets within the ambit of the global system is executed in a structured, hierarchical manner. This process reveals an underlying pursuit of modern cosmopolitan lifestyles (Beck, 2017; Delanty, 2008; Kaplan, 2001; Keating, 2021; Szerszynski and Urry, 2006; Weibl, 2015), which largely entails condensing the perceived global modern world into representative objects, thus allowing for the domestic consumption and appreciation of their functional and semiotic values without the necessity of physical travel to foreign lands. Analogous to the behaviour of Dai Wai, who adorns rooms with an array of global artistic and cultural motifs to fabricate a simulated modern global experience, many daigouers and their customers harbour global aspirations by purchasing and consuming products originating from disparate regions across the globe.

As revealed by Gao (2008), the inception of *daigou* in China was predominantly a gendered, middle-class endeavour. Chinese middle-class women, buffeted by their aspiration to ascend to a respectable middle-class echelon - an elevation visualised via their self-placement on a global scale, and hindered by the inadequacies of the Chinese market for myriad reasons, resorted to soliciting their Western-residing friends and relatives, or occasionally urban middle-class contacts with overseas connections, to purchase items on their behalf. This cycle of enquiry, tasking, purchase, communication, delivery, commentary, and repetition underpins the formation of extensive virtual sisterhood communities, wherein the subjectivities of buyers, customers, viewers, users, and commentators are interconnected and frequently interchangeable (Gao, 2008; Zani, 2019).

Far from merely reaffirming their global modern middle-class subjectivities, the daigouers' actions and experiences also contribute to 'worlding' - that is, reshaping their mental constructs of the world based on a hierarchical classification of products, modernity, and regions. This process effectively reduces the complexity and incongruence among different local markets to a select few commensurable symbols.

The spatialised authentication of source markets extends beyond purely commercial activities. Many Chinese daigouers, in addition to online streaming of goods, share vivid snapshots of their daily life in Nepal with potential customers via digital platforms. These snapshots offer comprehensive insights into their daily experiences and interactions with local Nepalis. As suggested by Zhao (2020), this form of self-disclosure is not an indiscriminate act, but rather a strategic and meticulously calculated endeavour. The objective is to underscore their authentic residency in Nepal, their expansive and reliable local partner networks, and their capability to secure high-quality products. While these snapshots cultivate trust between daigouers and their customers by evincing a sense of actual presence, their contents are carefully curated to conform to and affirm the popular perception of Nepal as a primitive society. In doing so, they serve as veritable attestations of the authenticity of the products they vend - for instance, the genuineness of the handmade cashmere scarves they purvey.

The aforementioned analysis elucidates an additional linkage between tourism flux and *daigou* mobility. While tourism serves as a conduit, physically facilitating the movement of numerous daigouers to and from Nepal, it also provides certain cultural touchstones and mobilises specific forms of cultural capital that enhance the commercial allure of the products they vend. While the majority of daigouers I engaged with expressed personal disinterest in Nepal's exoticism, they unanimously recognised its importance in substantiating the authenticity of their merchandise to potential customers. Consequently, they ensured that this impression was robustly projected in their product branding efforts. In this way, they demonstrated their active role within the tourism flux, capable of harnessing personal resources and technologies to validate and redefine its nature.

In other contexts, Martin (2017) has characterised the *daigou* practices of Chinese international students in Australia as an innovative strategy to combat the prevailing discrimination and underpayment they encounter in conventional labour markets. Analogous findings have been posited by scholars such as Zani (2019, 2020), who explores how women from mainland China residing in Taiwan leverage *daigou* to accrue emotional and financial capital while remaining marginalised within local formal employment systems. Although the daily lives of numerous Chinese daigouers are geographically confined to the compact area of Thamel, my respondents seldom expressed feelings of entrapment in Nepal. Few exhibited an inclination towards societal integration, and the opportunities available locally were adequate to satisfy their needs—particularly for those only resident in Nepal for several weeks.

Comparisons between daigouers in Nepal and their counterparts in Australia and Taiwan reveal that their varying perceptions, attitudes, and mobility practices result from their embeddedness within distinct trajectories. Chinese international students make significant financial commitments—such as visa fees, educational costs, and airfares—to travel to and reside in Australia, whereas the equivalent expenses incurred by Nepal-based daigouers are considerably less. By capitalising on the influx of Chinese tourists to Nepal—benefiting from improved infrastructure and governmental support—daigouers can frequently commute between the two countries without feeling trapped within the host society. Furthermore, while international students are subject to more systematic state regulation, daigouers operating under the guise of tourists enjoy greater travel flexibility due to the absence of reporting obligations to formal institutions like universities. Many daigouers I encountered in Nepal concurrently held tourist visas from other South Asian countries, such as India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Martin characterises daigou as "an opportunistic exploitation of temporary gaps" (Martin, 2017: 905), with practitioners perpetually seeking related opportunities by traversing different overseas locations as tourists.

Disc (pseudonym), a daigouer in his early 20s, is emblematic of many within this profession. Following his high school graduation, he spent several years "adrift in society" before heeding the advice of an experienced daigouer friend and journeying to Nepal—his first international sojourn. His knowledge of the destination was limited to the widely circulated aphorism, "Nepal is friendly to China." Besides the prospect of financial gain, Disc articulated a longing for broadened horizons, a desire to explore the wider world (Ch. *jian jian shi mian*).

Disc's narrative and motivations resonated with those of other daigouers I encountered. They employ the scant capital within their possession—typically monetary savings and a handful of social connections—to generate practical capital, primarily financial. This practical capital, however, often takes a more abstract and symbolic form. By situating themselves at the nexus of physical and virtual flows, they aspire to tap into transnational networks, thereby fulfilling some of their cosmopolitan yearnings. In certain instances, daigouers prioritise the acquisition of symbolic capital over its practical counterparts; the experience of visiting numerous foreign countries, expanded networks, and accrued human resources bestows upon them a sense of privilege and liberation.

In this regard, daigou parallels certain travel practices, such as backpacking. Similar to those who engage in the latter, daigouers leverage their mobility as a rite of passage, a means to self-"upgrade." Upon the completion of their journey, they reintegrate into their home contexts (Cohen, 2004)—potentially with enhanced social capital. Several young daigouers I met in Nepal confessed a lack of long-term commitment to this line of work. Their goal was to amass as much wealth as possible while abroad, which they planned to invest in entrepreneurial endeavours back in China, primarily in their hometowns. However, at the outset of their journeys, many daigouers are relatively vulnerable due to their paucity of resources, networks, and knowledge. In contrast to Martin's middle-class international students who can afford extended stays in distant destinations like Australia, these Nepal-based daigouers are less likely to undertake such extensive travel. Some daigouers even admitted to never having visited any of China's major cities prior to venturing abroad. Consequently, the transnational flows of Chinese tourists to Nepal and other developing countries in Asia and Africa provide these marginalised individuals with low-cost, alternative mobility systems, enabling them to personally experience globalisation.

Throughout this section, I have engaged in a critical analysis of the symbiotic relationship between the influx of Chinese tourists to Nepal and *daigou* mobility. I have expounded on how this flow offers a feasible system of mobility to the originally marginalised and vulnerable young daigouers, underpinned by favourable state policies, well-established tourist infrastructures, and expansive social networks. Far from being merely 'carried' by the flow, daigouers proactively contribute to its affirmation and sculpting via their commercial endeavours. As they market specific goods to their consumers, accentuating the exoticism of the source market, they play a role in shaping Nepal into a meaningful tourist destination within the Chinese context, thereby potentially converting their customers into future tourists.

Furthermore, I have dissected the sense of immobility that many daigouers experience in their native regions. Such spatial and social embeddedness coexist with the tourist flow and remain impervious to it. Yet, this flow introduces possibilities for these individuals to challenge their sense of stagnation. It is critical to note that although the tourist flow is capable of mobilising daigouers, more exhaustive studies are warranted to ascertain whether it truly empowers them. Few of the interviewees had managed to amass enough capital through this venture to establish their own businesses back home. The prevailing scenario, in fact, involved merely breaking even in terms of the income and expenditure associated with their peripatetic lifestyle. While

many had forged broader social networks through their *daigou* activities, more substantive evidence is required to establish whether the financial and social capital accrued could facilitate their upward mobility upon returning home.

This research conundrum, emerging from my observation of daigouers in Nepal, echoes Martin's caveat against equating mobility with capital, which is viewed as an "abstract, general and placeless form of value" (2017: 906). In the following section, heeding Martin's advice, I intend to paint a more nuanced portrait of the relationship between tourist flow, (im)mobility, and *daigou* practices. I shall explore the period from late December 2019 to April 2020, as a pivot point in the mobility assemblages (Xiang, 2021). By the end of this phase, most cross-border flows had come to a halt, and numerous daigouers found themselves stranded in Kathmandu. I contend that while the tourist flow significantly shapes *daigou* mobility, its cessation does not necessarily invalidate the latter. Paradoxically, while conventional modes of mobility may flounder, such conditions could potentially foster the emergence of new forms.

Moving Medical Masks and Stranded Daigouers

> "At approximately 4 pm, we reached the pharmacy where the proprietor, Suresh, had been anticipating our arrival. His countenance betrayed shock as he repeatedly exclaimed, 'Crazy! Crazy!' … he had spent the entire day making calls, only to discover a nationwide shortage of masks … he had managed to locate a substantial quantity of goggles and protective suits, currently in Hyderabad and due for shipment to New Delhi shortly. We accepted the bid without any negotiation, recognising that it was a now-or-never opportunity." (Lu, 2020; my translation)

> "This morning, Ma, Back, Lily, and I ventured outside to hunt for masks, each of us wearing our only N95 mask ... Our mask-clad faces drew curious stares. The small pharmacy near the hostel still maintained a decent stock of masks at reasonable prices (though I was unaware of the standard price for a mask in Kathmandu). Each of us purchased several standard three-layer masks at a rate of ten rupees each. However, Back and Lily, aiming to secure more masks for their

friends and family back in China, insisted on exploring other pharmacies…A middle-aged Chinese man was engrossed in a phone conversation, seemingly avoiding our gaze ... I purchased a total of 150 masks, both standard and N95 variants. Beck is scheduled to depart for China tomorrow, and I requested her to carry some masks for my parents and my wife's parents. (28th January, 2020; excerpts from my fieldwork notes)

The first quotation is drawn from posts by Yong Lu on Weibo, during his expedition to India to purchase personal protective equipment with backing from two Chinese private enterprises over the Chinese New Year 2020. He bills himself as the "most renowned Chinese daigouer of Indian anti-cancer medicine" (self-tag on Lu's Weibo homepage, accessed on 28 July, 2021). The latter entry is an extract from my fieldwork notes, chronicling my observations and personal experiences as a daigouer, driven by a mounting sense of panic and uncertainty, towards the end of January and the beginning of February, 2020. It is intriguing that on the same day, 4th January, Lu and I found ourselves engaged in analogous activities in distinct South Asian countries, motivated by different aims, resources, and trajectories. The common thread that ties together the divergent experiences of Lu, myself, and other daigouers during this unique, brief period is the function of India, Nepal, and South Asia as a whole, as informal alternatives to China's domestic official healthcare system.

Before the recent pandemic, Lu gained fame as a cancer patient who challenged China's medical policies. Diagnosed with leukemia in 2002, he turned to cheaper generic medications from India in 2004 due to China's high drug costs. Arrested in 2014 for selling these drugs, he was released after 135 days when charges were dropped. The 2018 film *Dying to Survive*, based on Lu's story, ignited debates on China's healthcare. Consequently, in May 2018, China committed to reducing tariffs on imported cancer drugs, with Premier Li Keqiang urging faster reforms by referring to the film (Bristow, 2018; Kuo, 2018).

Lu's story and the film also positioned India as the 'world's pharmacy' in Chinese discussions. This led many Chinese daigouers to explore informal medicine markets in South Asia, using Nepal as a hub. Nepal attracts these daigouers not just for its access to Indian products, but also for its offerings like authentic Chinese hotpot and Thamel's nightlife, after their shopping

excursions in India. The mask demand in Kathmandu in February 2020 can be seen as an extension of these ongoing Nepal-China interactions.

The pandemic initially surfaced in China in December 2019, in response to which China rapidly curtailed most of its physical interactions with the wider world. Nonetheless, the attempts to contain the virus fell short, facilitating its rapid global spread. In Nepal, the first confirmed case was reported in late January. However, the government's reaction to the health threat was delayed, with mask mandates not being implemented until March (Kumar, 2020; Poudel, 2020a, 2020b). Toward the end of that month, the Nepali government declared a national lockdown. Initially intended to last a week, it extended until July 21, 2020 (Nepali Times, 2020), with the country's borders effectively closed and all international flights suspended.

The 'mask mania' in Nepal primarily transpired from January to early February 2020. This phenomenon can be attributed to two factors. The first is the temporal window of approximately one month it took for the virus to traverse the Himalayan range. During this interval, the Nepali government did not take significant measures to address the potential spread of the virus from China. Numerous Chinese individuals in Nepal even felt fortunate to be outside their homeland. This temporal gap between the virus's emergence in China and its arrival in Nepal led to a discrepancy in perception and dissemination of associated risks. Although the Nepali government did not initially mandate mask-wearing, Chinese officials held a divergent viewpoint, issuing related regulations. The Chinese government has consistently advocated for mask use since the onset of the pandemic. Despite the halt in most physical movement between Nepal and China during this period, digital information freely crossed borders. Chinese nationals in Nepal received frequent updates on the severe shortages of all types of medical supplies back home, while Nepali media initially paid little attention to the pandemic. As suggested by my fieldwork data and local media (Poudel, 2020b), the initial response of local pharmacy staff to the influx of Chinese customers was more confusion than anything else.

As the discrepancies in the propagation of the virus and the dissemination of information started to converge, the cross-border movement of masks similarly subsided. By the end of January 2020, the Nepali government prohibited the export of masks to other countries, thereby directly curtailing the aforementioned mask mania (Poudel 2020b). Moreover, as the number of cases escalated, the Nepali populace became increasingly aware of the pandemic's gravity,

thus procuring masks, sanitiser, and other medical necessities. Prior to the pandemic, the price of a standard medical mask was approximately NPR 10; however, it soared to NPR 50 at the height of the mask mania. Consequently, some pharmacies in Kathmandu imposed purchasing restrictions related to these items.

नेपाल सरकार
स्वास्थ्य तथा जनसंख्या मन्त्रालय
औषधि व्यवस्था विभाग

फोन नं.: ४७८०२२७, ४७८०४३२
फ्याक्स नं.: ९७७-१-४७८०५७२
पोष्ट बक्स नं. १००३८
ई-मेल: druginfo@dda.gov.np
planning@dda.gov.np
मदन भण्डारी पथ, बिजुलीबजार
काठमाडौं, नेपाल

पत्र संख्या: ०७६।७७
चलानी नं: २६९०

मिति: २०७६/१०/१७

विषय: सहयोग गरिदिने बारे ।

श्री रसायन तथा मेडिकल आपूर्ति संघ, नेपाल
त्रिपुरेश्वर, काठमाडौं ।

उपरोक्त सम्बन्धमा हाल चीनमा देखा परि Novel Corona Virus (nCoV) बाट ठुलो जनसंख्या र क्षेत्रमा प्रभाव पर्न गई अन्तर्राष्ट्रिय स्तरमा नै जनस्वास्थ्य विपत्को अवस्था आईपरेको सन्दर्भमा नेपालमा पनि यसको प्रभावबाट रोकथाम एवं नियन्त्रण गर्ने विभिन्न रणनीतिक एवं कियाकलाप सञ्चालन भैरहेका छन् । यो सन्दर्भमा आवश्यक पर्ने विभिन्न किसिमका स्वास्थ्य सामाग्रीहरु जरुरै : Mask, Gloves तथा Hand Sanitizer को अत्याधिक माग भैरहेको र बजारमा अभावको स्थिति आउन सक्ने देखिएकाले देहायअनुसार गर्नु/गराउनुहुन अनुरोध छ ;

१. ती वस्तुहरुको पर्याप्त मौज्दातको अवस्था कायम राख्नुहुन ।
२. ती वस्तुहरुको मौज्दातलाई विचार नगरी निर्यात नगर्नु/नगराउनु हुन ।
३. ती वस्तुहरुको मौज्दातको विवरण, स्थानिय उत्पादकको क्षमता र मौज्दातको विवरण ३ दिनभित्र यस विभागमा जानकारी गराउनुहुन ।
४. ती वस्तुहरुको खुद्रा बिक्रि वितरण गर्दा नियन्त्रित रुपमा गरी देशैभरी उपलब्ध हुने व्यवस्था गर्नुहुन ।
५. ती वस्तुहरुको बिक्रिवितरण गर्दा साविकको मूल्यमा नबढ्ने गरी वा प्रचलित कानूनले तोकेभन्दा बढीमा बिक्रिवितरण नगर्नु/नगराउनु हुन ।

नारायण प्रसाद ढकाल
महानिर्देशक

Figure 39 Governmental ban on mask export (NoG, 2020)

This analysis suggests that the generally perceived dominant role of flows in shaping mobilities could be subject to question. The halt in the flows of tourism and industrial goods did not immediately lead to the cessation of *daigou* mobility. Contrarily, even as the majority of the tourist system was immobilised, *daigou* mobility endured for a period and even fostered novel patterns of engagement. To a significant extent, imposed immobility created lucrative opportunities for the resale of masks. Numerous stranded Chinese individuals, including tourists and expatriates, who were not professional daigouers prior to this, began searching for masks in Kathmandu's pharmacies. Some even embarked on mask-related *daigou* activities for profit—specifically, to offset their additional expenses incurred due to forced immobility.

The majority of individuals I interacted with purchased masks for two primary reasons: personal protection and for their families and friends in China. For example, Lily and Back (pseudonyms), both Chinese female tourists visiting Nepal for a Himalayan hike, arrived before

the onset of the pandemic. However, they were prevented from returning to China in late December 2019. For approximately a month, they were under quarantine in the same hostel where I was conducting my fieldwork. The hostel was closed to the public; residents could only venture outside for essential activities, which included the purchase of masks. Their *daigou* activities relating to medical masks were not driven by financial interest, even though being stranded in Nepal provided a business advantage in this context.

Figure 40 A Chinese tourist buying masks at the community pharmacy (my photo, 2020)

Figure 41 Around 2500 masks in the suitcase (my photo, 2020)

In this scenario, these stranded tourists, conditioned by the asymmetrical flows of products and information, evolved into special resilient agents. They facilitated transnational mobilities during a time when normal infrastructures that connected different societies were disrupted. Their bodies became primitive yet effective modes of transport when naturalised and normalised supports were withdrawn. Various types of social networks were mobilised in an unexpected and resilient manner.

In early 2020, my old acquaintance from China, Mr. You (pseudonym), asked for my help in sending 5000 masks to China for his father's factory. Although I initially hesitated due to Nepal's ban on mask exports to China, Mr. You informed me he had a contact in Nepal to source the masks. My task was to find a way to transport them across the border.

With courier services not an option, we needed someone to carry the masks as personal items. Lily, a Chinese tourist in Nepal, agreed to help, even emptying her hiking gear to fit the masks and thermal guns in her luggage. In return, she wanted to purchase 300 masks from Mr. You.

Figure 42 Masks in seven boxes and the suitcase and hiking bag (Lily, 2020)

On February 6th, 2020, I went with Lily to Tribhuvan International Airport, which was eerily quiet. Lily was initially stopped at security due to the lack of invoices for the masks. Surprisingly, after an officer took fifty masks, she was allowed to proceed. Once in Guangzhou, she learned of a 500-mask limit per package. She repackaged the masks into seven boxes and sent them to various recipients provided by Mr. You. By the next day, all masks had reached their destinations.

Ironically and interestingly, these masks had 'returned' home, since they were originally produced in Guangzhou, China. In fact, over 92% of the imported masks available in the Nepali market come from China. According to a report by Nepal's Department of Customs, during the fiscal year 2019/20, Nepal imported 73,199 kilograms of face masks from other countries, of which 67,833 kilograms were imported from China (Department of Customs, Government of Nepal, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic created various temporal-spatial channels through which reversing the movements of masks was possible. These reversed trajectories of daigou-ing made-in-China masks from Nepal back to China once again remind us of the heterogeneous, grounded, specifically contextualised, and conditioned contact experiences and networks under the grand framework of mobility and contacts.

In addition to extending to new actors, forced immobility exposed opportunities associated with fixity - something that has generally been undervalued in the flows. Many successful cases of onselling masks, as the relevant daigouers told me, depended on networks on the ground in China, Nepal, and elsewhere. The mechanisms for fulfilling a mask order were no different from other *daigou* activities: taking orders from China, seeking goods and trading in Nepal, as well as finding transportation means. However, masks were specifically regulated commercial products that were not easily obtainable in a market dependent on tourism. For daigouers seeking large quantities of masks, finding and buying them was more complex. They had to mobilise all their resources, accrued through their previous *daigou* experiences, to successfully complete orders. In other words, daigouers needed to utilise their local networks established and maintained prior to the pandemic. This necessitated long-term experience of living and trading in Nepal, rather than just occasional travel to the country for a few weeks at a time.

Moreover, preorders from clients in China were especially crucial because the need for masks was temporary and urgent. Hence, daigouers could not entirely disengage from their native networks. *Daigou* is indeed highly reliant on close, interpersonal relations. These trustworthy networks established and maintained between daigouers and their Chinese clients not only ensured the availability of masks at short notice but also vouched for their quality – a guarantee that relied on the trader's reputation.

Kang Yang (pseudonym), a professional daigouer in Nepal, provides a case in point. Prior to arriving in Nepal, Kang had *daigou* experience in India, where he established reliable connections with some local medical suppliers. On January 24, 2020, just before Chinese New Year, Kang received an urgent order from a regular client demanding the express delivery of 30,000 masks to a small city in China's interior. After contacting his Nepali associates and visiting several pharmacies in Kathmandu, Kang realised that such a large quantity of masks could not be supplied by his local connections. So, Kang reached out to his contacts in India and discovered that they could supply the masks, provided he visited Hyderabad and paid a deposit in advance. On Chinese New Year's Eve, he successfully secured the masks, which were then transported to China by his company. He earned around CNY 40,000 from this transaction, an amount that not only covered his costs but also generated a significant profit.

While successful daigouers like Kang were able to mobilise their transnational networks, many marginalised and vulnerable ones like Disc were left in their hotel rooms, uncertain about their

next business move. During our interview, Disc expressed his ambition to make money quickly, but his lack of experience, funds, customers, and contacts hindered his aspirations. Other daigouers relayed similar stories. With limited capital available, many resorted to searching for medical masks by visiting local pharmacies one by one, as each outlet only had a limited supply.

Indeed, the literature on *daigou* places great emphasis on the transnational networks formed through personal relations. Zani (2020), for instance, illustrates how the personal networks of *daigou* women aid in establishing new informal businesses that blur the lines between the virtual and physical worlds. Similarly, Zhao (2020) demonstrates how Chinese international students in Australia leverage their family and friendship circles to establish and grow their *daigou* enterprises. While these scholars highlight the flexibility and mobility of transnational *daigou* networks, they also underscore that these networks are not universal or placeless. Instead, they are rooted in various geographies and cultures. The successful and unsuccessful cases presented above further corroborate these findings during a specific, brief period.

It is important to note that although the *daigou* mobility concerning medical masks was sustained by immobile individuals and their localised transnational networks, it would be incorrect to view these practices as entirely fixed. To a significant extent, mask-related *daigou* activity was not entirely detached from the flow of tourism, as it relied heavily on infrastructures that facilitated the latter. For instance, some masks were sent to China through express delivery services when these were still accessible, while most were carried in personal suitcases. The infrastructures that facilitated these mask movements largely overlapped with those that regulated the flow of tourists and industry.

Throughout this period, groups of people who were typically mobile, such as daigouers, tourists, expatriates, and others, were forced to limit their activities to specific areas in Kathmandu. Limited local movements were allowed, turning hotels, restaurants, and grocery stores into everyday spaces for many Chinese individuals. These initially tourist-oriented facilities offered many daigouers affordable accommodation and food during this challenging period, providing critical support for their mask-related *daigou* activities.

Additionally, many people's movements, connections, and exchanges took place through virtual communities like those on WeChat. This resonates with Urry's (2007) notion that the digital realm is a site for imaginative, communicative, and virtual travel. Thus, these physically

confined individuals could move through social media, unbounded by time or space constraints. This form of information exchange through communication technologies reflects the "powerful, interdependent knowledge-based systems that, through new software, are increasingly organizing production, consumption, travel, and communications" (Urry, 2007: 149).

Before the pandemic, WeChat groups were already a popular platform among Chinese tourists and Nepali locals for establishing connections and exchanging information, acting as critical virtual hubs for the flow of tourism. These virtual tourist hubs were then used to update individuals on daily pandemic-related developments. Many people used these WeChat groups to discuss potential exit strategies from Nepal and to urge Chinese authorities to assist those stranded. Furthermore, people continuously posted advertisements in the groups, claiming they had reliable sources for various categories of qualified masks. These individuals included not only Chinese but also Nepali people who asserted that they had connections to local dealers with substantial mask stocks or that they were dealers themselves. Some explained to others how profitable the mask business could be, suggesting that it was more than just selling masks back to China at higher prices. It was depicted as a valuable opportunity to make a significant profit from a small investment, offering a life-changing chance to achieve upward social mobility.

Connections in these virtual spaces are not isolated from the power dynamics in physical spaces. As nomads in the contact zone, daigouers often face discrimination, despite the fact that almost everyone in the contact zone is a daigouer to some extent. They are discursively framed as unstable, vulnerable intruders with little capital and high mobility. The discursive formation of daigouers, revolving around possession of capital and stability, suggests a hierarchical stratification among the Chinese population in Nepal, where *Laoni* (Old Nepalis) are anxious, cautious, and wary of their newly arrived Chinese compatriots.

"*Laoni*" (Old Nepali) is a term commonly used to refer to Chinese individuals who have more established connections and greater stakes in Nepal, often implying significant capital accumulation. In this discourse, various forms of capital are accrued through long-term endurance, which not only allows *Laoni* to save a considerable amount of money but also equips them with rare skills such as fluency in the Nepali language, extensive social networks, and property ownership. Many Chinese newcomers in Nepal view *Laoni* with a mixture of envy, admiration, and resentment, perceiving them as both empowering and controlling. On

the one hand, *Laoni* assist newcomers in integrating into their new society by sharing information and networks. On the other hand, they are mediators and agents who control and distribute resources, thereby accumulating capital by exploiting their fellow nationals. In many instances, this locally embedded power and capital can be transnationally utilised and amplified across societies.

Mr. Fen (pseudonym), who can be classified as a *Laoni*, is often referred to as a big daigouer. In his late thirties when I met him, he differentiated himself from younger daigouers like Disc who prefer casual sportswear, presenting himself as a mature businessman in suits and leather shoes. He arrived late to our first meeting, explaining that he had to help three young female daigouers settle into Kathmandu. Over the years, Mr. Fen has moved away from direct onselling practices and has begun to position himself as a manager for less experienced daigouers. He introduces young Chinese daigouers to Nepal, helps them adapt to the foreign environment, and connects them with local store owners. Mr. Fen's case suggests that achieving stability in local and social structures can be equally, if not more, important for accumulating social capital during transnational movements.

This stability in geographic and social terms can foster the development of hierarchy. The second time I met Mr. Fen was at a meeting where he was invited to share his learning experience at a prestigious university in China as the representative of overseas Chinese in Nepal. This study session was organised by the Chinese government. Instead of sharing what he learned from his courses, Mr. Fen focused his presentation on networking with other elite overseas Chinese from various countries. To gain these networking opportunities, he encouraged his colleagues to cooperate more actively with Chinese authorities in Nepal, rather than focusing solely on their businesses.

The interchangeability of transnational economic and political capital not only connects the diasporic community and the members' original social networks, but also constructs a transnational hierarchical structure that vulnerable daigouers seek to escape by mobilising their bodies and limited resources. Their micro-level, empirical, and tactical activities are constantly overshadowed by grand narratives, even in virtual spaces.

On February 3, 2020, *Nepal_trip*, a popular Chinese social media account run by a Chinese tourism professional based in Nepal, posted a lengthy article on its WeChat platform. The

article, entitled *Making fortune during the national calamity? The broken dream of Chinese mask dealers in Nepal* (Yee, 2020; my translation), details the author's experience of buying 2000 masks in Nepal, which were immediately sent to family and friends in China. It also discusses the obstacles the author encountered when attempting to buy masks voluntarily to support China's efforts to combat the pandemic.

The author also sarcastically portrays Chinese mask dealers in Kathmandu as puppets controlled by capital, blindly chasing profits in the neoliberal market. He also expresses satisfaction at the misfortune of these mask dealers when their masks were halted by the Nepali government. In conclusion, the author writes:

> "According to some inside sources, driven by the prospect of high profits, these international mask dealers even resorted to predatory loans to support their businesses. They are now in dire need of money... As inappropriate as it might sound, the failure of these dealers doesn't seem to disappoint anyone else. What they failed to consider was an ancient and traditional Nepali law regulation, established by its founding father, the Great Prithvi: 'Those who maliciously intend to inflate commodity prices and aim to make excessive profits, as long as their behaviours can be confirmed by five or more people, shall be executed on the spot.'" (Yee, 2020).

On March 23, 2020, the Nepali government, without prior notice, declared a national lockdown that was immediately implemented at 6 am the following day (The Record, 2021; Pradhan, 2020). The country's borders, both to the south and north, were closed and all international flights were suspended. Everyone's daily life was severely impacted, particularly the vulnerable and marginalised populations living in the country's urban areas. Thousands of daily wage earners in Kathmandu lost their income, food, and shelter, essentially becoming homeless and without support. Many were forced to leave the city but with public transportation halted, they had to walk home with all their belongings. Some people tragically died on these dangerous and unsettling journeys. (see Acharya, 2021; Adhikari, 2020; Himalayan News Service, 2021; Hutt, 2020; Joshi, 2020; Lama, 2021; Ojha, 2021; Press Trust of India, 2020; Shrestha, 2021; Subedi and Jha, 2020)

The Chinese population in Nepal was also caught unprepared by the lockdown. People on the move were forced to confine themselves to various fixed spaces scattered around Nepal, primarily in Kathmandu and Pokhara. Most of these people, mainly temporary visitors to Nepal with various purposes, found themselves confined to hotel and hostel rooms, trying to figure out a way to return home. Flight tickets that were available were too expensive for most people to afford. With physical movements significantly hindered, most connections and exchanges moved online, particularly to WeChat chat groups. Two main topics dominated these chat groups: updates on the development of the pandemic situation in Nepal, and discussions on when and how people could return home.

On March 30, 2020, a group of Chinese nationals gathered in front of the Chinese Embassy's consular section in Hattisar, Kathmandu, to protest the Chinese Embassy's lack of assistance in helping them return home. On May 8, 2020, more Chinese individuals gathered near Singha Durbar, the compound of the Nepali central government, demanding the Nepali government lift flight restrictions. The protest escalated into violent clashes with the Nepali police force (Dhungana, 2020; Rajbhandari and Bhandari, 2020; Rising Nepal, 2020).

Figure 43 Stranded Chinese people holding self-made plane-shape board, stating "I need to go home" (Dhungana, 2020)

The protests by Chinese nationals in Nepal were quickly captured by smartphones and disseminated through social media platforms. Despite being physically confined due to the lockdown, people's virtual selves gathered in online forums and chat groups to discuss the events. Many of those discussions were critical of the protesters. The loudest voices condemned the Chinese protesters, accusing them of acting like immature, helpless infants who were unable to fend for themselves.

These critics felt that the protesters were harming China's image in Nepal and providing Nepalis with a reason to ridicule China and its people. The protesters were also associated with daigouers, with some critics sneering that their current predicament was the result of their own greed. Voices attempting to defend the protesters, to provide context or explain their actions, were largely drowned out in this wave of criticism and remained relatively unheard. This incident provides an insight into the complex social dynamics at play within the Chinese community in Nepal and the nuanced, sometimes negative, perceptions of those involved in *daigou* activities.

The transnational movement around mask-related *daigou* activity was indeed transient and relatively small-scale, unable to constitute a significant flow in and of itself. After February 2020, the mask mania quickly receded, supplanted by a far more prominent, state-endorsed mobility - the "mask diplomacy" (Karásková and Blablová, 2021) and "vaccine diplomacy" (Hotez, 2014; Lee, 2023) practiced by both states in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the early stages of the pandemic, it was Nepal that sought to project a message of support and solidarity to its Northern neighbour. In February 2020, after banning individual exports of masks to China, the Nepali government donated 100,000 masks to the country (onlinekhabar, 2020). However, as the pandemic intensified within Nepal's own borders, it could no longer afford such gestures of goodwill.

From the end of March to September 2020, comprehensive categories of medical supplies, donated by the Chinese government, the government of the TAR, and the Chinese army, arrived in Nepal (For comprehensive event reports, please refer to the information section of Chinese Embassy in Nepal). The Chinese government was eager to repair its image by positioning itself as a helpful provider of solutions to the pandemic rather than an irresponsible entity hiding the truth about the disease. The media's coverage of the arrival of these medical supplies was

extensive and meticulously captured. Every step of the process was recorded, from the piled boxes with friendly messages next to large cargo planes, to the Chinese ambassador in Nepal handing over certificates or boxes of masks to senior Nepali officials.

One cultural implication of Covid-19 is the increased association of mask-wearing with China and, more broadly, Asia. This association has often been accompanied by stigmatisation and politicisation, linking mask-wearing with alleged anti-democratic behaviour. (see Choi, 2021; Haynes, 2020; Leung, 2020; Li et al., 2020; Ma and Zhan, 2022; Villa et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021) Despite this, China's desire to improve its international image, particularly in relation to the pandemic, was evident in its large-scale donations of medical supplies to Nepal.

Figure 44 The mask donation ceremony (THT Online, 2021)

Figure 45 My photo taken in a Nepali bookstore (2020)

The COVID-19 pandemic, while ostensibly putting multilateral cooperation between Nepal and China on hold, paradoxically provided China with fresh opportunities to extend its influence in Nepal. In the beginning, China's attempt to vie with India for influence did not meet with immediate success. India had already commenced its "*Vaccine Maitri*" (Vaccine Friendship) initiative with Nepal, donating 1 million doses of vaccines (Tan, 2021), whereas Chinese-manufactured vaccines remained on the Nepali government's waiting list. However, China experienced a turning point in April 2021. India began to exhibit what has been termed "vaccine nationalism" (Kamradt-Scott, 2020; Katz et al., 2021; Lagman, 2021; Mayta et al., 2021), ceasing its vaccine exports to Nepal due to escalating domestic crises (Neupane, 2021). At this juncture, China emerged as a reliable partner, pledging to guarantee medical equipment delivery (Niquet, 2020) to the Global South, a region largely abandoned by Western developed nations during the pandemic.

On the 26th of May, 2021, China announced its intention to donate 1 million doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to Nepal, in response to a request from Nepal's president. Prior to reaching out to President Xi, President Bhandari had penned a letter to her Indian counterpart (Giri, 2021). However, in contrast to Beijing's immediate response, New Delhi's reaction appeared decidedly ambivalent. Notably, as early as March 2021, China had already donated 800,000 vaccines to Nepal (Post Report, 2021a). In July 2021, China pledged an additional 1.6 million vaccines to Nepal as aid (Post Report, 2021b). Concurrently, Nepal has plans to purchase a further 4 million doses of vaccines from China (Ani, 2021), and an additional order of 6 million vaccines is currently under consideration (Poudel, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has presented an in-depth ethnographic investigation into the complex world of daigouers and their role in the mobility of medical products between Nepal and China, both before and during the pandemic. This exploration has unveiled the intricate networks that daigouers navigate, their motivations for participating in this practice, the innovative strategies they employ, and the limitations they encounter.

The *daigou* phenomenon extends beyond mere commercial practice, serving as a means of social mobility for many Chinese individuals. The networks that daigouers navigate are complex and multifaceted, involving a range of actors from diverse sectors and locations. These networks, far from static, are constantly evolving in response to changing circumstances, necessitating adaptability and resourcefulness from daigouers. In this practice, experience, cash, customers, and contacts are of paramount importance. These networks also extend into virtual spaces like social media and online streaming platforms, which daigouers use for their everyday activities. These platforms are utilised to post commercial promotions and snapshots of their travels abroad, serving not only to maintain rapport with (potential) customers but also to brand themselves as mature, resourceful, and reliable individuals, agents, and business people. In general, daigouing goods in foreign countries allows participants to confirm and reconfirm their positions in the modern world and their relations to the rest of the world. This practice is tied to the broader investigation of Asian people's arranged and hierarchical concepts of modernity, development, and globalisation.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, daigouers leveraged their limited resources and information to sell medical masks back to China. This practice provided a window into the broader dialectical power relations in the contact zone, including the dynamics of mobility and staticity. This specific *daigou* phenomenon prompts a reconsideration of the notion of failure. The contrast between the weak, dependent, and slow mobility of daigouing medical masks and the vibrant, autonomous, and quickly responsive mobility of mask diplomacy raises questions about the meaning and value of failure in this context.

While this thesis has discussed numerous heterogeneous anti-hegemonic practices, experiences, and tactics from various individual agents crossing time and space in the contact zone, it has also revealed the effects of homogenous powers, the interlinked nexus of colonialism, nationalism, and capitalism. To some extent, various agents' decolonial and decentralising efforts, at their best capacities, only serve to highlight the ambiguous epistemological turn to complexity, thus, perhaps suggesting an empirical failure. What does an epistemology of complexity mean? Is it really a failure? How can this failure be useful? How can such exploration prepare us to face the new normality of the future (Roy, 2020; Sheller, 2020)? The final chapter will conclude this work by exploring the questions of failure, and, of course, hope.

Chapter Nine Conclusion

Finally, this thesis arrives at its concluding stage following an extensive journey. It began with the intricate histories of Buddhist monks, diplomatic envoys, emperors, and their servants, and delved into various forms of imagining Nepal throughout history and in the present. Riding the waves of low-end globalisation, it ventured into the bustling streets of Thamel, navigated through diverse spaces of everyday life, and tracked the (im)mobile stories of individuals. Cross-border, grounded narratives of tourists, mobile content creators, guides, agents, street vendors, shop owners, hostel managers, mid-rank engineers, construction workers, cleaners, drivers, daigouers, and many other actors, some less recognisable, largely shaped the course of this journey. Driving the journey's fluctuations is the experimental nexus of the decolonisation agenda, the remapping of Nepali Studies, and the everyday life of the aforementioned actors (and others).

Instead of adhering to the post- or decolonisation trends originating from the academia in the Global North, which initially aimed to democratise liberal-capitalist Western democracy by including traditionally marginalised groups (Chakrabarty, 2005), this thesis is primarily inspired by the palpable mismatches I encountered during fieldwork and in my everyday life as a person from Asia. These mismatches expose the enduring effects of coloniality and their duress (Stoler, 2016), which persistently obstruct direct interactions for people from non-Western countries.

In this thesis, I consider the dialectical relationship between the knowledge produced by so-called Nepali Studies and the diverse trans-Himalayan interactions. It investigates the coloniality of Nepali Studies' knowledge, its effectiveness in Nepal-China interactions, and how we might deconstruct and reconstruct a 'new' Nepali Studies that informs, guides, and cares for actual, diverse actors. Shifting its focus to the authentic and heterogeneous actors in Nepal-China relations, this thesis deviates from traditional top-down perspectives and explores the multiple and sometimes contradictory temporalities and positionalities of various agents who "move relationally across multiple scales and intra-local networks" (Halvorsen and Zaragocin, 2021: 129). It does not aim to replace the subjectivity of traditional actors in Nepali Studies, such as the West and post-colonial states. Instead, it aims to reposition them within a more complicated arena where a largely unrestricted competition with other discourses can take place after peeling back their seemingly representative facade. Here I would like to

reiterate my argument that decolonising Nepali Studies is crucial for producing alternative knowledge that serves and facilitates contemporary Nepal-China direct interactions.

Despite my well-intentioned efforts, my attempt to maintain an arena that can accommodate free competition between hegemonic and heterogeneous forces has not been entirely successful. In other words, while this thesis seeks to dismantle the colonialism-rooted, Western-centric, and later state-sanctioned knowledge of Nepali Studies, it ironically seems to bolster the counter-argument that the knowledge meant to be deconstructed is fundamentally entangled in almost every aspect of the interaction between Nepal and China. It appears to be the intricate and inseparable part of almost every element of the contact zone. Therefore, a potential failure, rather than a promising hope, may be the conclusion. For readers to better understand this concept of failure, I will briefly review all the preceding chapters of this thesis in the following section of this chapter.

To some extent, the chapters of this thesis are arranged chronologically. Chapter Two explores the history of the Nepal-China contact zone. Rather than treating prevailing historical narratives about the shared past of Nepal and China as explicit, organised, and faithful to history, this chapter views them as constructed cultural products of the contact zone itself – a dialectical embedding and embodiment of various historical, political, global (Western), and local forces. This interrogation primarily uncovers how the multiplicity, ambiguity, and complexity of Nepal-related knowledge in local languages was reduced to a definitive narrative constrained by a 'scientific' and 'rational' framework, influenced heavily by European ideas from the early twentieth century. The construction of modern knowledge about Nepal has been a discontinuous journey, shaped by various actors with shifting agendas. Counterintuitively, this journey has embodied local agents' active learning about Nepal through European languages, not just their intrusion. From the 1910s, particularly since the 1950s, the production of Europe-centric and nation-bound knowledge about Nepal has become an intrinsic, though minor, part of the material and 'external' domain of modern nation-building (Chatterjee, 1993) in China and Nepal. This body of knowledge, silencing and dominating other local forms of knowledge, becomes a fundamental pillar of the current Nepal-China contact zone, making attempts to deconstruct, bypass and move beyond it appear almost impossible.

Building upon the historical discourse, the two subsequent chapters tackle the same topic: representations of Nepal in modern Chinese popular culture. Treating representation as a

process of world-making and a product of cultural practices rather than a reflection of an authentic world, these chapters investigate various contemporary representations of Nepal within the realm of Chinese tourism in Nepal, including travelogues and Vlogs. Two distinct and even contradictory types of contemporary representations of Nepal are discovered. One, following the Shangri-la lineage, depicts Nepal as a far-off, mysterious earthly paradise. The other, adhering to Eurocentric discourses of development and modernity, portrays Nepal as a place lagging in the evolution of human civilisations, particularly in comparison to China. Analysing these two chapters together further unveils the coloniality of knowledge that permeates the minds and imaginations of ordinary people, as seemingly contrasting representations both abide by the same set of cultural, racial, national, and modernity codes that purposefully and hierarchically ascribe different meanings and roles to various areas of the world. It is disheartening to find that these cultural products of contemporary Chinese creators reveal coloniality as a mindset and power dynamic largely inherited by people from former colonies, mediating interactions regardless of their directness.

The subsequent chapter also explores representation, but shifts focus from China to Nepal and from tourism to diplomacy. This chapter explores the gendered figurations of the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Ms. Hou Yanqi, and Nepal's efforts to control Chinese masculinity on its soil by purposefully shaping perceptions of China and its key political figures. Centring around the issue of masculinised, heterogeneous statehood logic, the chapter highlights the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2008) in the context of state and diplomacy.

Chapter Seven investigates the multiple spatialities of the Chinese presence in Nepal. This chapter has special significance for the entire thesis as it 'anchors' the discussion of transborder mobilities to the contact zone's ground, thus forming an integral part that converses dialectically with other chapters in this thesis. Specifically, this chapter investigates three places-in-the-making, namely the emerging Chinatown of Kathmandu, an expatriate compound, and a *minsu* (homestay). As sites that accommodate and condition many forms of direct contact, the stories of these places suggest more about uncertainty and division than the unity one might expect from unmediated contact. In other words, physical co-presence to a large extent fails to erase or overcome mental boundaries. The Sinicisation of Thamel signifies an exoticisation in one of the world's most 'exotic' places. Asymmetrical power dynamics, ingrained in racialised concepts of development and global capitalist disparities, shape the social conditions of the material space of the compound. Dai Wai's *minsu* did not evade the same fate, as its global,

mobile dream also faded into an inability to facilitate border-crossing mobilities of money, people, and ideas, restricted by both domestic and international impediments.

Following an extensive discussion of spatial realities in the contact zone, the final major chapter again 'mobilises' its analysis. More specifically, it focuses on a new mobility pattern occurring via Nepal, the traditional Himalayan entrepôt—Chinese *daigou* mobility. It strives to reveal the complex, dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility in the contact zone by illustrating how many daigouers, typically from vulnerable and marginalised socio-economic backgrounds, attempt to counteract their immobility in China by mobilising their limited capital within and beyond Nepal and China. The analysis focuses on *daigouing* a specific type of product during a specific period—medical masks at the early stage of the pandemic. It uncovers the tenacity, resilience, and semi-autonomy of forms of informal mobilities that can function without depending on formal counterparts. However, the sustainability of such resilience is open to debate. A comparative examination of two trajectories of medical masks and vaccines' movements during the same period of the pandemic quickly highlights how hegemonic forces, represented by the states in this region, still dominate the routes of contact.

The analysis within this thesis, to a large extent, re-confirms the two incongruences I noted in the detention room and mentioned in the introduction to this thesis: firstly, the dissonance between the significant Chinese presence in Nepal and the dominance of Western knowledge about the region; and secondly, the disparity between the state's homogenous 'high' understanding of Nepal and the diverse, 'low' knowledge of ordinary people about the land. These persistent mismatches may indicate a sense of failure, but on the other hand, these shortcomings need not necessarily be disheartening, as their identification could be the first step towards their negation. Quijano (2007: 177) emphasises that the first step to dismantling the coloniality of world power is epistemological decolonisation. For this thesis, the specific barriers identified that impede direct trans-Himalayan contact between Nepali and Chinese people are numerous, diverse, and mutable among different agents. But the most significant one, in its aggregate form, suggests the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013) that inform institutional projects, such as governments, schools, universities, libraries, and tourist stores, and seek to control nearly every aspect of the contact zone.

The questions then arise: How can we deconstruct and reformulate these institutionalised projects for those who are still variably and asymmetrically structured within them, and where

can we find inspiration and sources of power? This becomes another overarching task of this thesis. The sources of power identified in the thesis, as I have emphasised from the outset, lie in the mundane everyday life of ordinary people, the liminal realms between colonised domains; in other words, (de)colonial difference and border spaces "where imperial global designs and local histories encounter each other, resulting in processes of adaptation, adoption, rejection, integration, and other responses" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012: 73). Throughout this thesis, these spaces often appear under other names, such as the contact zone and in-between places. The emergence and maintenance of these spaces of ambiguity and negotiation are energised by the colonisers' repression. As Quijano (2007: 169-170) asserts,

> "...over the modes of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, modes of signification, over the resources, patterns, and instruments of formalized and objectivised expression, intellectual or visual. It was followed by the imposition of the use of the rulers' own patterns of expression, and of their beliefs and images with reference to the supernatural. These beliefs and images served not only to impede the cultural production of the dominated, but also as a very efficient means of social and cultural control, ... Then European culture was made seductive: it gave access to power…In Asia and in the Middle East, the high cultures … were nevertheless placed in a subordinate relation not only in the European view, but also *in the eyes of their own bearers*."
> (my italics)

The manifestation of repression, in terms of agents, agendas, methods, targets, impacts, and visibility, varies across time and space, resulting in different gaps within seemingly seamless systems. The type of gap I focus on in this thesis lies within the ordinary lives of people. These gaps, akin to holes in the sand, are scattered, unstable, shifting, yet articulated with both general conditions and each other. Within these gaps, especially when examined on contemporary scales, coloniality is largely invisible. It is doubtful that many Chinese tourists will realise their conception of Nepal as Shangri-la carries Orientalist biases. Even those who do, often celebrate rather than critique this notion. In many everyday contexts between Nepal and China, coloniality takes on the form of duress. As Stoler (2016: 6-7) explains,

"its imprint may be intangible, but it is not a faint scent of the past. It may be an indelible if invisible gash. It may sometimes be a trace but more often an enduring fissure, a durable mark...the hardened, tenacious qualities of colonial effects; their extended protracted temporalities; and, not least, their durable, if sometimes intangible constraints and confinements"

The process through which coloniality exerts repression, seeking to control various contexts including everyday ones, and perhaps even extending its effects beyond the end of direct colonialism, relies on numerous direct and indirect instruments. Area Studies has been, is, and will continue to be, one of these tools. Designed as a powerful tool for knowledge production, it promises "psycho-cultural profiles of the world's peoples" (Child and Barnes, 2019: 44), facilitating a theoretical West to produce knowledge of the empirical Rest (Mérieau, 2020). This shortcoming of Area Studies, rooted in universities and other academic institutes in the Global North, has been critically evaluated by academics worldwide, both North and South, and has even been sentenced to death (Franzinetti, 2015; Harootunian and Miyoshi, 2002; Walker and Sakai, 2019). However, both the colonised space and the colonising tool can be used for decolonising purposes, provided we acknowledge the affinities, affiliations, and productive differences (Bhagat-Kennedy, 2018) inherent in them but overlooked. I, in other words, view transnational peripheral knowledge (Jivraj et al., 2020) as essential for establishing theories and methods rather than merely as raw materials. It is precisely the power of marginal and alternative knowledge that is valued in this thesis.

To unleash the power of marginality and alternativity, and bring peripheral perspectives to the centre of discussion, I employ a framework attuned to transcultural nuances, on in which, transculturation is not about obliterating all borders and blending everything together, but rather, seeking to recognise the instability of cultural signification (Bhabha, 1994), the multitudinous routes of cultures rather than their roots (Jivraj et al., 2020), their contingent and intricate articulation, their potential for disassembling, and their status as an episteme-in-formation (Hall, 1995). More specifically, a transcultural framework should investigate "the role played by capitalism throughout the globe and [to] the relationship between the experience of everydayness and the relentless regime of the commodity form... into the unevenness lived and experienced in the everyday" (Harootunian, 1999: 146).

Specifically, the main trajectory that interlinks with other routes through various mundane contexts in this thesis is the tourism-oriented low-end globalisation occurring between and beyond Nepal and China. This type of contact is termed "low-end", not out of disrespect, but in an attempt to challenge the term by suggesting its multiple temporal, spatial, and affective coordinates. This term is "low-end" because it is grounded, empirical, and experienced by various concrete agents. As a result, many personal, individual, and even scattered stories have been narrated in previous chapters. Each story is unique, being variously contextualised and conditioned. However, they can be characterised by a common spirit—the private responses, such as obedience, enhancement, appropriation, resistance, damage, or indifference, to forces bigger than themselves in specific communicative contexts. These nuanced moments of connection between individuals and powerful forces, though they may seem minor, passive, and unimpressive, embody the agency of various actors in navigating their environments and responding to them.

Thus, for this thesis, decolonising Nepali Studies is not about drawing a clear boundary between a 'colonial' past and a 'post-colonial' present, but rather recognising that the multiple presents that contribute to Nepali Studies are based on colonial histories and their duress. It explores how various agents' attitudes and reactions to the matrix of history and present may alternatively inform academia, and vice versa. It involves (re)writing a 'low-brow' Nepali Studies. In the conventional imagination, Area Studies are 'high' because their subjects are about the world, continents, areas, and states, and their methods and theories are top-down and alien. However, a decolonising Nepali Studies (or any other Area Study) can be low-end because it cares about individual agents, their "hopes and despairs, fulfilments and disillusionments, revolutions and evolutions" (Clayton and Kumar, 2019: 3) in their lives. It seeks a kind of knowledge that is not intended to be far-reaching or even universal but addresses agents' issues and experiences in specific, concrete contexts. As Clapham (2020: 151) suggests in Africa, "a decolonised African Studies can only emerge where it belongs, in Africa itself, led by the efforts of African academics to re-engage with their societies, seek to understand where their problems lie, and develop theoretical as well as practical ways to deal with them." Therefore, decolonisation matters (Svensson, 2021) and it is not a metaphor (Tuck and Yang, 2012), as do Area Studies and everyday life.

The final visualisation of this future remains uncertain. To be candid, this thesis cannot provide clear-cut answers, as its duty lies in the realm of reality. The fact of the matter is that these

direct interactions between Asian countries only commenced recently (Chen, 2010). However, since previous chapters of this thesis are filled with minor yet impactful narratives about the contact zone, it might appear incomplete to not include a story within this concluding chapter. The concluding narrative I wish to recount is that of Jade (a pseudonym) and her transnational charitable networks. Of all the stories gathered during fieldwork, this particular one strikes me as a beacon of promise, offering a visionary glimpse into what the future of direct interactions within the contact zone might resemble.

The Final Story - Jade and her Trans-Himalayan Network for Merit Accumulation

Jade, in her thirties and hailing from Xinjiang, China, had resided in Kathmandu for approximately six years when I encountered her. After parting ways with her husband, she relocated with her young daughter to Kathmandu, where she is employed at a Sherpas' trekking firm, and her daughter is enrolled in a local school. Besides her full-time job at the trekking company, she runs a Chinese language class in a small room in Boudhanath, one of the Tibetan Buddhist centres in Kathmandu. Furthermore, she volunteers as a Chinese language teacher in a nearby monastery. Though Jade does not subscribe to Buddhism, her prolonged interactions with Buddhists in Nepal have led her to favour viewing the world and society through a semi-Buddhist lens, connecting her to a wider network of Buddhist followers in China.

One day, amid the lockdown, Jade came across an article in the Himalayan Times about a woman living in a village near Bhadgaon who was battling starvation due to the lockdown. Determined to offer help, Jade, along with two other Chinese Buddhists living in Boudhanath, decided to donate basic food supplies to the woman. She also procured assistance from the monastery where she had fostered positive relationships. The monastery dispatched two monks and a jeep to assist Jade, who functioned as the coordinator, interpreter, transporter, and driver. However, when Jade's team liaised with the local authority, they were asked to provide food for more individuals in similar predicaments. This task surpassed Jade's personal resources, prompting her to solicit aid from her Buddhist contacts in China. As a result, she formed a WeChat group.

WeChat is a versatile social media platform created and maintained by the Chinese IT company Tencent, which introduced its mobile payment application in 2014 (Tang et al., 2021). In essence, WeChat allows users not only to communicate but also to transfer money to each other,

as introduced in the previous chapter. Jade's group, comprising mostly Chinese Buddhist followers, used the platform to raise funds to purchase food for the villagers. The process of sending and gathering money was straightforward and direct. Users in the group could send digital Red Pockets containing specific amounts of digital cash. Upon receiving the Red Pockets, Jade could 'open' them, thereby accepting the digital cash into her own WeChat account. After amassing the money, Jade needed to identify local agents, typically found in places like Thamel and accepting WeChat cash, to convert the digital RMB cash into physical Nepali rupees.

Subsequently, Jade accumulated more than sufficient funds to purchase food for the villagers. However, the WeChat group continued to operate even after the mission was completed. It was not initially Jade's intention to maintain the group as a long-term venture. To some extent, it was the in-group users who wished to extend the avenues through which they could assist people in Nepal. In fact, they were so enthusiastic about the project that Jade was compelled to establish rules limiting daily donation amounts to manage the group's daily tasks. Regardless, the group has continued to the time of writing (10 June 2023) with 238 members, about a quarter of whom actively donate money regularly. In Nepal, Jade, in collaboration with local partners such as Tibetan monks and Chinese residents, continues the charitable work at a steady and modest pace, aiding many different people in need.

In many instances, requests for donations reach Jade directly through her associates in Nepal, or she proactively identifies those who might need assistance. She then presents the request to the group members, soliciting their views on the matter. To my knowledge, Jade has never turned down any requests. The required funds are typically collected overnight, and Jade promptly channels the money to the relevant parties in Nepal. Jade consistently exhibits a high level of responsibility and respect for the trust placed in her by group members. She posts a statement in the group almost daily, detailing each donation from the previous day. Furthermore, whenever she disburses funds to local requestors, she asks for an invoice or other forms of receipts. She also takes photographs at the donation site not just as proof, but to inspire her fellow group members.

The Buddhist religion plays a critical role in upholding the group's fundamental operation and its democratic mechanisms. As previously mentioned, most group members are religious followers, encompassing Tibetan Buddhists, Han Buddhists, and Muslims. Moreover, even

those lay members believe that helping others can contribute to their accumulation of religious merits. Consequently, when they send digital cash in the form of Red Pockets, many opt to leave an auspicious note on the cover, praying for themselves, their families, and the world. This practice transforms daily transnational financial transactions into convenient religious exercises. Furthermore, the group members often discuss religious topics, such as clarifying religious disciplines and reposting Rinpoche's teachings. In this sense, this chat group functions as a transnational "non-institutional" religious site (Ji, 2006) beyond the active regulation of any state.

Having witnessed many stories of individuals navigating life in the Nepal-China contact zone, the story of Jade's transnational charity network appears remarkably harmonious. Creativity, solidarity, cooperation, democracy, efficiency, and compassion characterise the group's activities. To a large extent, Jade's group provides a glimpse into how an alternative, direct, and cooperative form of contact may manifest in the present and future of the Nepal-China contact zone, driven by alternative, limited, heterogeneous, and locally conditioned values and motivations. Unconventional, unarticulated, decentralised, and experiential emotions, akin to emotional petit capitalism (Zani, 2020), as opposed to rational, explicit, linear, and calculated benefits, may become another significant momentum that adds complexity to the dynamics of the contact zone. As these new dynamics emerge, new spaces are also discovered, leading to various boundaries being challenged and redefined (Bjork-James, 2015; Hallett and Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015, 2000; Kozinets, 2010; Miller and Slater, 2000)

Jade and her colleagues do not view themselves as saviours, coming to 'repair' Nepal, but rather as individuals who are appreciative of the opportunities to genuinely assist people and fulfill their religious obligations. This approach, to some extent, rejects the paternalistic models of aid that can often perpetuate colonial power structures.

Jade's story suggests a decolonising approach to Nepali Studies, one that is not delineated by a top-down, external perspective, but instead respects and amplifies local voices. This proposes a type of study that is deeply rooted in the lived realities of people's lives, their struggles, and their resilience. This model values the 'low-end', 'low-brow', the everyday, the human, and the humane aspects of life. My approach to Nepali Studies does not seek to enforce an alien theoretical framework or proclaim universal truths. Instead, it allows for a multiplicity of truths, recognising the complexity and diversity of human experiences. It acknowledges that there is

not a single, linear narrative to be narrated but rather a rich tapestry of intersecting stories. This could be the image of a decolonising Nepali Studies: not a rigid discipline with clearly defined borders but a flexible, evolving field of study that is continually reshaped by the people it seeks to understand.

In this context, Jade's transnational charity network, her empathetic engagement with Nepali society, and her commitment to practical, grassroots action could serve as a blueprint for how we might re-imagine and re-formulate Nepali Studies in a decolonising, inclusive, and locally rooted manner. While this thesis does not claim to offer a definitive answer, it aims to point towards a more just, equitable, and inclusive method of studying and understanding Areas.

'New' technology, motivation, values, spaces, agency, and concrete agents are fostering new patterns of trans-Himalayan contact. These patterns, as epitomised by Jade's story, are more grounded, engaged, concerned, and collaborative. These diverse forms of new empiricism on the area's ground necessitate a shift in focus towards the academic body of Area Studies. Such studies should "attend to the diverse ways of knowing social experience and advance an expanding array of tools, practices, and concepts to share these understandings." (Westmoreland, 2022)

This thesis endeavours to provoke a dialogue, inviting more Area Studies that are informed by local contexts and are comparative, albeit not necessarily commensurable, to join the discussion. The quest for a decolonising and multimodal Area Studies within the Asian context is merely beginning, and it is my aspiration that this thesis can contribute meaningful perspectives to the ongoing conversation. There is no universal remedy, and the path towards decolonisation is long and fraught with challenges, but narratives like Jade's offer a sort of roadmap - a glimpse of what could be achievable. It is this potential that we must commit to exploring as we work towards the decolonisation of Nepali Studies and Area Studies at large.

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Chapter One

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