

**A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF GEOGRAPHIC STUDIES IN
THE TRANS HIMALAYAS**

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INTRODUCTION

The Himalayas, as the tectonic borderlands between South and Central Asia, have long spurred the imagination of the West. For over two centuries, explorers and mountaineers have sought within its uppermost reaches, the key to their own spiritual redemption in a world increasingly dominated by cold rationalism and industrial dehumanization. Moreover, both the mysteries ascribed to its sacred topography and the physical challenges presented by the arduous terrain has continued to draw seekers interested in conquering both the highest peaks in the world and their own inner selves.

Specifically, the Trans Himalayas have also formed the crossroads of many cultures and religious traditions. Spanning the frontier separating India, Nepal, and Bhutan from Tibet, the severe and foreboding landscape of highest Asia has played host to numerous peoples who have traveled back and forth across its mountain passes since time immemorial. As the interface between two great civilizational zones, the various groups inhabiting the borderlands have exhibited great resilience in borrowing cultural forms and inventing their own to suit the particularities of their precipitous geography.

What has thus emerged in the wake of centuries of adaptation to the high altitude environment is a diverse tapestry of livelihood strategies that have in turn drawn significant interest from geographers. Indeed, with its disciplinary focus on the human-land relationship, geography has served as the central organizing pivot for studying the High and Trans Himalayas. From basic surveying and rudimentary ethnography pioneered by the early explorers and enthusiasts, to contemporary environment and development discourses debated by university academics and international development practitioners, the evolution of Himalayan scholarship has also paralleled the evolution of geography as a field.

As such, this paper will attempt to consider some of these prominent areas of Himalayan studies together as a part of the ongoing and ever expanding project of geographical inquiry in the region.

With a particular focus on the Trans Himalayas as a dynamic zone of interaction between cultures, civilizations, and nations, it will first grapple with the complicated legacy of Western explorers and adventurers who achieved the difficult passage into Tibet from India, as perceived by themselves and contemporary biographers. This will in turn be contrasted with the lesser known accomplishments of Indian surveyors and religious pilgrims who made substantial contributions to Trans Himalayan geography in their own quiet way. It will then move forward in time to evaluate some of the most comprehensive of recent ethnographies covering the region's peoples with a specific focus on mobile Trans Himalayan groups. Along with this survey, the paper will discuss how the authors have attempted to contextualize their experiences within emerging discourses such as cultural, political, and liberation ecology. This will aid in evaluating the crucial environmental debates affecting Trans Himalayan communities today, leading to a final discussion on the future direction of the field in the context of shifting geopolitical realities and research priorities.

THE EXPLORERS

Each step I experienced that subtle thrill which anyone of imagination must feel when treading in hitherto unexplored country. Each corner held some thrilling secret to be revealed for the trouble of looking. My most blissful dream was to be in some such valley, free to wander where I liked, and discover for myself some hitherto unrevealed glory of Nature. Now the reality was no less wonderful than that half-forgotten dream; and of how many childish fancies can that be said, in this age of disillusionment?

— *Eric Shipton upon reaching the Nanda Devi basin in 1934* (Shipton & Tilman, 2000).

Undeniably, many of our modern perceptions of the High Himalayas were shaped by a core group of adventurer-explorers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Coinciding with the late Raj period and era of philosophical eclecticism, this new breed of geographer was fired both by the ideals of “high” imperialism and the romantic pull of a mysterious, spiritually encoded terrain. This combination of motivations gave rise to a unique geographical tableau that seemed to recall at once that ancient Hindu orientation towards the Himalayas as the wellspring of divine knowledge, and the Western quest for a refuge from the ills of the modern industrialized world.

Moreover, the life trajectories of many of these personalities demonstrated the seemingly contradictory impulses that sought to both subjugate and elevate their object of fascination and study. While several Europeans made the difficult passage across the Himalayas¹, three in particular bear mentioning here for their overlapping but emblematic contributions to Trans Himalayan geography. The three also left extensive written records of their exploits that made distinct impressions on the popular imagination and subsequent scholarship. While rich in topographic and ethnographic detail, they also documented their own very personal engagement with the land and people of the region that evolved over the course of their lives.

HEDIN (1865-1952)

Near the Shipki-la, we crossed the border line of Tibet and India. Here, for the last time, we were at an altitude of 16,300 feet. I remained long, gazing toward Tibet, the land of my victories and my sorrows, the inhospitable land where both man and Nature create obstacles for the traveller, and from whose dizzying heights the traveller returns with a whole world of unforgettable, precious memories, in spite of the difficulties.

— *Sven Hedin, upon leaving Tibet, 1908* (Hedin, 1909).

Sven Hedin, a seasoned Swedish explorer, perhaps made the greatest modern contribution to Himalayan geography at the turn of the century. Trained as a physical geographer, Hedin traveled extensively throughout Eurasia, crossing into Tibet from the extreme West of Ladakh in 1905 and exploring both the high plateau and the borderlands in the southwest for almost three years. Moreover, Hedin's epic feats of exploration revealed in the minutiae of the physical landscape. He took copious notes and filled several large volumes with illustrations, sketches, photographs, and maps. Interestingly, Hedin professed to have originated the term Trans Himalayas for the system of mountains that separated South and Central Asia. He also claimed to have definitively located Mt. Kailash, the mythical centre of the world for Hindus and Buddhists alike, and the source of major

¹ Other notable Europeans who explored the Trans Himalayas include Father Antonio de Andrade (Western Tibet, 1624) and William Moorcroft (Western Tibet, 1812, Ladakh 1819, Kashmir 1822). George Bogle and Samuel Turner, in their capacity as agents of the East India Company, reached as far as Shigatse in 1774 and 1783 respectively, before being rebuffed by the Panchen Lama.

rivers such as the Brahmaputra, Sutlej, Indus, and Ganges (Hedin, 1909), although this was later disputed by British geographers (Allen, 1982).

Beyond the work of his foundation and a largely positive biography of his life published in 1984 (Kish, 1984), Hedin did not cut a sympathetic figure in many quarters. His relations with the British were especially turbulent given that they jealously guarded the keys to Himalayan exploration in the era of the Great Game. His vocal support for the German cause in both world wars also cast a shadow over his record of exploration. His admiration for Nazi Germany, fear of Russia, and controversial diplomatic missions to Berlin ensured his further marginalization even in his native Sweden. And although the incredible extent of his travels was well respected, he was later pilloried for his self-aggrandizement and disparaging attitude towards local peoples, rendering his writings excessively problematic for sensitive modern scholars (Meyer & Brysac, 1999). However, Hedin did leave a rich legacy, rectifying earlier surveys, exemplifying the explorer as scholar, and paving the way for future expeditions.

YOUNGHUSBAND (1863-1942)

In the year previous to Hedin's foray into Tibet, an ambitious British colonel rampaged his way to Lhasa, achieving through force of arms the opening of Tibet to the West. As leader of the expedition, Sir Francis Younghusband typified an unusual breed of imperial adventurer that combined geographic exploration with colonial expansion, as well as a spiritual immersion into the subject of study. Indeed, Younghusband would serve the British Empire in various capacities throughout his career, including as president of the Royal Geographic Society from 1919 to 1922. Moreover, much like T.E. Lawrence, he would work for cross cultural understanding while developing his own syncretic spirituality based on the many religious beliefs he encountered in his travels (French, 1994).

As a young army officer and explorer, Younghusband's career paralleled that of Hedin's in that they both explored Central Asia in their twenties before gravitating towards the Trans Himalayas and Tibet². In 1904, after years of exploration and travel, Younghusband was given the task by the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon³, of forcing the recalcitrant Tibetans into a treaty with Britain. With 2000 Indian soldiers and 10,000 coolies in tow, he passed through Nathu La in Sikkim, engaging the Tibetan defenders in a series of bloody encounters⁴ that culminated with his entry to Lhasa (Younghusband, 1910). Younghusband himself acknowledged that the campaign was "a terrible and ghastly business" which resulted in unnecessary carnage. However, as later scholars have noted, he did accomplish his dubious goal of becoming the one of the first Europeans⁵ to enter the forbidden city (Allen, 2004). Yet while his exploits earned him the admiration of the public, the British government itself was embarrassed and immediately repudiated the treaty for fear of upsetting the Russians and Chinese and setting a provocative precedent.

Despite Younghusband's later rapprochement with the Tibetans and his conversion to the cause of Indian independence in his later years, the expedition had lasting repercussions on Trans Himalayan relations. For Younghusband himself, the march to Lhasa was a dark stain on otherwise remarkable record of geographic achievement. For Tibet, it demonstrated Lhasa's vulnerability in an age of rapidly shifting geopolitical relations and more worryingly, gave the Chinese cause to intervene and eject "Imperialist aggression" from their "territory". By paving the way for the 1914 Shimla Convention that established the disputed McMahon line as the Indo-Tibetan border, the invasion also created the grounds for the future Sino-Indian confrontation that would fundamentally affect the course of Asian history for the worse.

² In 1887, Younghusband crossed the Gobi Desert, the first European to do so since Marco Polo.

³ Lord Curzon would later become president of the RGS in 1911.

⁴ By using Maxim machine guns, the British force massacred over 2,800 Tibetan militia in several separate engagements. Younghusband's troops suffered few casualties in return.

⁵ Only the enigmatic Thomas Manning in 1811 and two Frenchmen in 1844 had entered the city. Indian explorers dispatched by the British to Tibet did secretly reach Tibet in the late 1800s.

HARRER (1912–)

The phenomenon of Heinrich Harrer, the flamboyant German mountaineer that spent seven years in Tibet and developed a special rapport with the Dalai Lama during World War II, encapsulates a whole range of cultural perceptions that have been passed down to succeeding generations of Himalayan and Tibet enthusiasts. Unlike other travelogues, Harrer's arduous adventure was made all the more fascinating by the pivotal events surrounding his time spent in Lhasa and his unique position as a Westerner in the court at Lhasa.

Harrer, like Hedin, sympathized with the Nazi party in his youth, although his involvement seems to have been limited to athleticism and mountaineering. Indeed at the time, German mountaineering was as much about seeking some mythical Aryan Shangri-la as proving the prowess of the Nordic race. Several teams were sent to various peaks including Harrer's expedition to Nanga Parbhat where he was captured and interned by the British in a POW camp⁶. However, unlike Hedin, Harrer's relationship with the Dalai Lama and the impending Chinese invasion of Tibet seemed to have contributed to his spiritual awakening and political transformation (Harrer, 1953). Later, when his past dalliances with the Nazi party became an issue, he deftly framed the narrative arc of his life story as a path towards redemption from the very Buddhist sins of arrogance, pride, and ignorance.

However, it is in the transition of his memoirs to a Hollywood film where some of their most interesting implications came into sharp relief. Orville Schell, dean of journalism at the University of California at Berkeley uses the 1997 film starring Brad Pitt to dissect the problematic relationship between Tibet, the Dalai Lama, and Western Romanticism. Not a poor film by any means, *Seven Years in Tibet* in fact proved faithful to Harrer's vision of himself and his surroundings. However, it is the vision projected by many of Schell's prominent interviewees that careened into predictable

⁶ After repeated escape attempts, Harrer finally succeeded with a handful of companions, arriving on the Tibetan frontier by the end of 1944.

fantasy. To Schell's dismay, he found that the discredited Shangri La⁷ mythos of a pristine and isolated society, closed off from the rest of the world, had only been emphasized by the film to make the simple point about the perfidy of the Chinese and saintliness of the Tibetans (Schell, 2000). However, despite China's protestations, the ineffectual nature of Hollywood's intervention was found most wanting when it failed to bring about substantial qualitative change in the policies of important powers like the US and EU. Eventually, what Schell speculated and feared is that the Tibetan cause seemed destined to remain a cause célèbre, popular precisely because it required little in the way of sacrifice by its supporters who rather preferred their virtual Tibet to the messy reality of a society in transition and irrevocably absorbed into the Chinese "motherland".

INDIAN EXPLORERS AND PILGRIMS

Nain Singh is not a topographical automaton, or merely one of a great multitude of native employees with an average qualification. His observations have added a larger amount of important knowledge to the map of Asia than those of any other living man.

— *Sir Henry Yule, address to the Royal Geographic Society upon the presentation of the gold medal to Nain Singh* (Waller, 1990).

While these larger than life figures suffered from over exposure in the public imagination of their day, the travails of Indian explorers who preceded Younghusband and Hedin by forty years went largely unnoticed until recently. Employed by the British to cross the Himalayas and surreptitiously map the Tibetan plateau, surveyors such as Nain Singh and Kishen Singh Rawat, nicknamed "Pundits" by their British employers, traveled the entire length and breadth of the region, accomplishing amongst the greatest feats in 19th century geography (Hopkirk, 1983). Hailing from Trans Himalayan communities themselves, these explorers drew on their local knowledge, relations with their Tibetan counterparts, and similarities in appearance to sneak their way across forbidden territory, confronting a series of dangers en route. The fact that they were able to blend in helped

⁷ Shangri La refers to the inaccessible utopia of James Hilton's novel "Lost Horizon". "La" is mountain pass in Tibetan, which gives a clear indication that it should be a hub of commerce and intercourse rather than an isolated settlement.

them immeasurably and they quietly went about collecting and storing their data in prayer wheel until the threat of discovery and frostbite returned them to India. The British were especially indebted to Nain Singh who accurately mapped the location of Lhasa in 1866.

For his service, Pundit Nain Singh was awarded a land grant from the British government, a gold watch from the Paris Geographical Society, and a gold medal from the Royal Geographical Society in London⁸. Physically exhausted from his travels, he quietly settled down in his home village near the Tibetan frontier and would have remained largely forgotten until recent scholarship shed light on his invaluable contributions (Rawat, 1973; Waller, 1990). The stories of other explorers quickly followed suit, and the Survey of India brought out a map highlighting the full extent of their endeavors. Unfortunately, Nain Singh and other Indian explorers seemed to have left little in the way of extensive memoirs of their travels. In the early 20th century, Jodh Singh Negi, a state official from the Himalayas, did publish a diary of his journey into Western Tibet (Negi, 1920). However, in contrast to the bombast and self-importance of his Western counterparts, the straightforward rapportage and relative dearth of commentary in his journal earned his works little attention. Shorn of the deeply problematic exoticizing gaze, his minimalist account also lost much of its storytelling potency, a difficult trade off that many writers must spurn for embellished accounts of their personal exploits.

Likewise, Li Gotami Govinda, an Indian Buddhist from Bombay, let her pictures of the austere and desiccated landscape of Western Tibet speak for themselves (L. G. Govinda, 1979). Married to an esteemed German scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Anagarika Govinda (née Ernst Hoffmann)", Li Gotami was born into a wealthy Parsee family before her restless artistic spirit brought her and Lama Govinda to the Himalayas in 1947. As an avid photographer, she documented their journey

⁸ Controversial at the time, the former head of the RGS opposed the gifting of the society's award to a native geographer. However, Yule, an eminent scholar of Central Asia, argued convincingly that, "*either of his great journeys in Tibet would have brought this reward to any European explorer; to have made two such journeys adding so enormously to accurate knowledge... is what no European but the first rank of travelers like Livingstone or Grant have done.*"

across the frontier into the lost kingdom of Guge with the loving care of a religious pilgrim, moving effortless among the Drokpa nomads to the ancient source of Tibetan culture. As a Buddhist, she became the first and perhaps only non-Tibetan woman to ever live in Tibetan monasteries.

Li Gotami's simple, unadorned photo essays highlighted the spiritual dimension of the human-land connection with a minimum of commentary. While Lama Govinda, one of the foremost Western scholars of Tibetan Buddhism, broke new ground with his account of their journey to the forgotten spiritual centres of Tsaprang and Tholing and the holiest of holies, Mt. Kailash, Li Gotami contributed significantly to the historical record of the art and architecture of Western Tibet with her photographs (A. B. Govinda, 1969). Her efforts became all the more important, when twenty years later, the forces let loose by the Chinese Cultural Revolution ravaged much of Tibet's cultural heritage.

Similarly, some recent independent films have attempted to present the cultures of the Trans Himalayas to the world in a more authentic light. In contrast to the big production and promotion launched for *Seven Years in Tibet*, films like Ulrike Koch's *The Saltmen of Tibet* (German/Switzerland, 1997), and Eric Valli's *Himalaya* (France, 1999) have chronicled the lives of ordinary people and their relationships between themselves, their animals, and their land. Both earned high marks for their realistic portrayal of the vicissitudes of life and livelihood in the Trans Himalayas. While Koch's documentary dwelled on the survival strategies of nomads inhabiting the frigid desert of Chang Thang plateau, Valli chose to recount a coming of age story in the Dolpo region of Northwestern Nepal. In their own distinct styles, both directors employed film as an exceptional medium for ethnographic documentation, either following the life path of a group of nomads or using actors from the local community to enact their own stories. Devoid of Hollywood gloss or the compulsion to suit desired stereotypes, the films represent a valuable contribution to understanding the human-land relationship of the Trans Himalayas.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Traffic is the life and soul of the Bhotiyas and were the trade between the hills and Hoondes to become closed (though the wants of the Tibetans and their dependence on India for so many of the necessaries and luxuries of life may always be supposed to render such an event improbable) he would soon become an half-starved savage, or abandoning altogether his present station at the outposts between human endeavor and the extreme horrors of unconquerable nature, would rapidly merge into the common herd of Chinese Tartar or the Khasia Paharees.

— *Revenue Officer JH Bratten commenting in 1833* (Hoon, 1996)

By the middle of the 20th century, the existing scholarship of the Himalayas was rapidly becoming antiquated. While the early explorers sketched the physical landscape and engaged in limited ethnographic surveys, anthropological research lagged behind, especially for the remote and isolated peoples of the High and Trans Himalayas. As such, cultural and historical geography fieldwork came into vogue as a way of filling in the blanks left by the early explorers.

In this, Americans took the lead as seminal figures like Carl Sauer at the University of California at Berkeley developed field studies to map the cultural landscape at the heart of the people-land relationship. Sauer, as the architect of the “Berkeley School” and champion of historical geography, left a remarkable legacy, including the groundwork for many exceptional ethnographies of the Himalayas and the most recent theoretical developments in the discipline. In contrast to the far ranging travelogues of the earlier explorers, these new university-based studies situated themselves in local communities. Borrowing heavily from cultural anthropology, they nevertheless remained primarily based out of geography owing to the primacy of landscape in precipitous climes such as the Himalayas. Moreover, Sauer’s vision proved incredibly malleable, maintaining its relevance through various transformations of the discipline over the decades (Stevens, 1993). Hence in recent years, these studies were able to embrace a range of frameworks including environmental history, cultural ecology, and political ecology while studying traditional themes like land use patterns, indigenous knowledge systems, environmental degradation, cultural change, and the future of the subsistence economy.

THE KHUMBU SHERPA

The first of these efforts were given a boost by the ascent of Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and the Sherpa Tenzin Norgay in 1953. As high-altitude guides and porters, the Sherpas of the Tibet-Nepal borderlands had become the preferred companions for Europeans expeditions to Himalayan peaks over the middle part of the century. Tenzin's central role earned the Sherpas the respect and attention they had hitherto lacked as indispensable partners in the mountaineering adventure. Soon after, the expansion of road networks and communication infrastructure in the post-war era allowed for a wider array of visitors beyond the dedicated mountaineer to their remote communities.

By the 1990s, the Sherpas had become the most extensively studied of High and Trans Himalayan groups. Extensive ethnographic studies documented their agropastoral and land use practices and historical relationship with the land (Brower, 1991; Fèurer-Haimendorf, 1975; Stevens, 1993). The Sherpa of the Khumbu region surrounding Mt. Everest drew the most attention, principally because they had experienced the most widespread change due to the collapse of the Tibet trade, nationalization of the forests, the rise of mountaineering and tourism, and the imposition of the Sagarmatha National Park in 1976. The park in particular had radically altered forest use patterns, prompting a traditional people vs. park conflict in some quarters. This has in turn elicited further study in hopes of either fine tuning conservation policies or documenting community grievances.

THE LAND OF "BHOT"

The experience of the Sherpas was widely shared by a number of groups in region. Most of the peoples including the Sherpas living in the Trans Himalayas of India and Nepal had long been called "Bhotiya" by their southern neighbors. Bhotiya derived from "Bhot", the South Asian term for people of Tibetan origin. However, while in Nepal, the individual ethnicities of peoples like the Sherpas had been recognized, in India, this nomenclature has persisted as a means of distinguishing

the Tibetan-related groups of the frontier from other Indo-Aryan inhabitants of the Indian Himalayas.

Moreover, most scholars noted that trade and transhumance have represented the indelible face of Trans Himalayan cultures for centuries. Even in the earliest surveys of the region, the British highlighted these key aspects of life on the frontier, further speculating quiet presciently that these practices served to differentiate Trans Himalayan peoples economically and culturally from their neighbors to the north and south. Defined by the seasonal rotation of people and their livestock across geographical space, Himalayan transhumance involved a twice, and sometimes thrice yearly migration from high-altitude alpine summer pastures to lower elevation winter grazing lands. The trek included the movement of whole communities as opposed to shepherding which usually only engaged individual shepherds. Ecologically, this livelihood strategy followed closely the carrying capacity of a variety of micro-environments along a vertical altitudinal gradient. In the Himalayas, this entailed a cyclical movement of people and their animals from pasture to pasture and local knowledge about the climactic and soil conditions that governed the resources available in any particular grazing area.

Haimendorf, one of the most prolific authorities on Sherpas, drew a sharp socio-economic distinction between the highly mobile Trans Himalayan traders and transhumant herders and the sedentary farmers of the Middle Himalayas (Fèurer-Haimendorf, 1975). Although the latter drew their livelihood from dependable yet meager source as in subsistence agriculture, the former had little in the way of resources, yet more than compensated with a keen sense of commerce and travel across the Himalayan frontier. As a result, they were better placed to take advantage of the new opportunities created by transformations in the regional economy.

This affirmation of the Bhotiya lifestyle echoed earlier British texts that lauded them as “intrepid traders” and admired them for their “manly qualities” (Sherring & Longstaff, 1906). This moved the

British to compare the Bhotiya favorably to their lowland neighbours, not coincidentally as they considered the trade with Tibet important for their own strategic and commercial interests. Despite the setbacks suffered by the Bhotiya, they remained relatively prosperous by moving into other professions and taking advantage of government programs for scheduled tribes (Topal & Samal, 2001). However, this move away from their traditional livelihoods often left them with a sense of unease and melancholy over the loss of their mobile culture.

THE BHOTIYA OF THE INDIAN HIMALAYAS

For the Bhotiya of the Indian Himalayas, Hoon's 1996 study shed new light on transhumance by approaching the traditional livelihood strategy from multiple perspectives. While she more than adequately outlined the Indo-Tibetan origins of the Johar Bhotiya of Kumaon Himalayas⁹, the most rigorous aspect of her study involved drawing upon both oral testimonies and anthropological research to map out transhumant activities across the Himalayan terrains. Seasonal cycling of grazing grounds across diverse altitudes inherent to transhumance was also examined and detailed in full. Over the course of one season she actually accompanied several families on their journey to summer grazing grounds, field studies made all the more urgent as more and more families had left this difficult lifestyle for settlement in towns and cities. Her study concluded with open-ended discussion on the future of the Bhotiya, who had already been predicted to lose their cultural distinctiveness if they ever abandoned their nomadic ways.

Sherring, a British commissioner of the Kumaon Division, and later Chandola, an Indian historian, described the Bhotiya's historical relations with Tibet (Chandola, 1987; Sherring & Longstaff, 1906). While Sherring surveyed with broad strokes the people of the borderlands, Chandola's work complemented Hoon's study of transhumance by looking at neighboring Bhotiya groups, as well as trade through the Mana and Niti passes of the Garhwal Himalayas. Moreover, Chandola detailed

⁹ Pundit Nain Singh Rawat hailed from this community close to the Indian frontier with both Tibet and Nepal.

the historic ties between the Garhwal kings and rulers of the Ngari Kor Sum province of Western Tibet and described from a personal vantage point the friendship-based relationship between the Bhotiya traders and their Tibetan counterparts.

This latter group of Bhotiya known collectively as the Tolchas and Marchas, also experienced a disruption and social transformation akin to the Sherpas. As Trans Himalayan traders, they were even more negatively impacted by the complete closure of the Sino-Indian border with the further seizure of their lands for military purposes. While they adjusted by shifting to the thriving mountaineering and trekking trade that had surged around Nanda Devi, India's highest peak, they were again dislocated in 1982 when the region was declared a national park. Since then, they have developed an uneasy and often outrightly hostile relationship with the park authorities and have deeply resented the loss of their local economy and customary rights. This has prompted a series of studies from the region's Himalayan institutes, as well as an international campaign to ensure their stake in any future development. Moreover, Bhotiya communities from the Niti Valley played a key role in the 1970s Chipko environmental movement, which itself has been the subject of several studies and academic debates¹⁰.

THE MAGAR OF DOLPO

On a more cultural level, Fisher (1986) studied the largely isolated Magar community of the remote Dolpo district in northwestern Nepal. While one of many ethnic groups of the region, one of which served as the basis for the film *Himalaya*, the Magar stood between the Indian/South Asia and Tibetan/Central Asian cultural zones and their religion reflected a parallel synthesis of Hindu, Buddhist, and animist beliefs. Fisher described how trade brought these influences together to enrich their identity. He also gave a frank account of the pitfalls of anthropological research. His difficulties

¹⁰ Chipko has been analyzed most thoroughly within an environmental history disciplinary context. See the landmark study, "Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya" by R. Guha (Berkeley : University of California Press, 2000).

were magnified for a time by the community's suspicion of outsiders, particularly as he undertook his research during the time of heightened cold war tensions between China and the US.

Interestingly, the Magar have been placed in a similar position to that of the Bhotiya. With the border largely closed and their local economy attenuated, the assimilatory pressure from the south and east had become much greater, leading the Magar to gradually adopt Hindu rituals and social arrangements. While Sherring had found the Bhotiya had all but identified as Hindus by the time of his 1906 survey (Sherring & Longstaff, 1906), the Magar were moving in this direction at the time of Fisher's study (Fisher, 1986). Along with this cultural transformation, the Magar had also begun integrating into the Hindu-based political and economic system of Nepal. Fisher's point that "economic metamorphosis has been the entering wedge of cultural change" bore out in a complicated fashion among the Magar, which was confirmed by the experience of the Bhotiya and many other groups of the Himalayan frontier.

THE GADDIS OF HIMACHAL

While many of the transhumant shepherds of the Trans Himalayas came from Tibetan stock or groups ethnically affiliated with their northern neighbors, other peoples including the Gujjars and Gaddis of the Indian Himalayas derived from Indo-Aryan origins, while still breaking with the caste-based social relations of their sedentary neighbours. Saberwal in a companion volume to his documentary film on the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh, covered the plight of Gaddis as they confronted insensitive conservation policies that had usurped their land rights like the Bhotiya of the Niti Valley and the Sherpas of Khumbu Himal (Saberwal, 1999). Taking a political ecology perspective, Saberwal used the example of the Gaddis to highlight the historical context to colonial and post-independence era forest management policies that were in the author's view, based on faulty notions of desertification and degradation in the Himalayas. Convergent with

the state's resource needs and commercial interests, the perception of looming disaster did much to encourage the authorities to interfere with and sharply curtail the rights of customary users of forest lands. Saberwal also outlined how bureaucratic park management as the heir to colonial forest policies, continued to alienate local people and made conservation much more difficult to enact at the grassroots level¹¹. Moreover, Saberwal also discussed how grazing played an integral role in the maintenance of open meadows and plant biodiversity, local knowledge also known to the Bhotiya of Nanda Devi. As such, Saberwal's work served to critique the shortcomings of the most cherished principles of the international conservation community.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINARIES

As such, these ethnographies with their coverage of numerous sites of environmental conflict, have supplied many opportunities to flesh out a whole range of theoretical approaches to the environment vs. development paradox in a peripheral mountain economy context. Several of the field studies touched upon people vs. park conflicts (i.e., Sagarmatha National Park, Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, Great Himalayan National Park, etc.) or resistance to state policies that have informed some of the most vibrant debates in the conservation literature. While most of these cases studies adopted a cultural ecology perspective with some extending their discussions into the realm of political ecology, all of them pointed to broader phenomena acting in the cultural and geographical specificity of the Trans Himalayas.

At a wider level, the ethnographies pointed to the next iteration in theoretical frameworks beyond their own parochial purview, as well as further refinements of political ecology as a critical subdiscipline. As Peets and Watts (2004) noted, the divergent currents within political ecology had moved it in equally diffuse directions, deflecting it away from praxis to a state of academic self-

¹¹ In the GHNP, wildlife protection and dam building have complicated the picture, whereas conservation itself was displaced by hydroelectric development.

absorption. With its roots in Marxian political economy, they also expressed some apprehension that political ecology would suffer the same fate, and flounder in extreme post-structuralism and social construction. Consequently, Peets and Watts gave tentative thought to a new “liberation ecology” by returning to case studies and focusing on how people or groups understood their relationship with the environment. Integrating both political economy and poststructuralism, they proffered their own term, “environmental imaginary” to describe this process by which nature is imagined by a group with all the attendant social and moral implications. Moreover, by embedding the social in the natural, they returned to the roots of geography by foregrounding the real and imagined “nature-society” relationship (Peet & Watts, 2004).

Thus, sites of contestation such as the common park vs. people conflicts over livelihood and land use issues, illustrated this concept well as the various sides to the disputes exhibited distinct environmental imaginaries in active contention. Similarly, the most powerful example of an environmental imaginary has involved the discourse around Himalayan environmental degradation, which has remained a hegemonic interpretation despite being discredited years ago by leading geographers. In this controversy, Ives and Messerli (1989) mounted the most significant challenge with their masterful review of the complexities inherent in the “environmental crisis” afflicting the region. As a follow-up to the pivotal Mohonk International Mountain Conference in 1986 that Ives also organized, the authors continued their questioning of the purported crisis vis-à-vis the prescriptions traditionally offered by international bodies and their conservation ethos. While their ideas were critical of much of the thinking of the 1970s and 1980s that trumpeted an imminent environmental disaster in the Himalayas, it actually corresponded to the views of social activists who saw conservation policies boomerang against the very communities that were struggling to save their commons. To their credit, the authors give space for voices from the region to express their views on the issues on an equal footing with scientists.

AN ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS?

At the heart of these misconceptions was the powerful environmental imaginary for which Ives coined the term, “Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation” or THED (Ives, 2004).

Although Ives based his elaborate critique on scientific grounds, the pernicious nature of the overgeneralizations and baseless speculation pointed to a deeply rooted imaginary that seemed to colour most mainstream coverage of Himalayan natural disasters. Supporting this thesis, Thompson et al. (1986) made similar arguments to coincide with the Mohonk Conference, using the example of the Khumbu Himal in the vicinity of Everest to contest the widely propagated view of human-induced deforestation. This was partly in response to the early stages of planning for the Sagarmatha National Park that would have imposed a blanket ban on local Sherpas from accessing their erstwhile communal forests (Thompson, Warburton, & Hatley, 1986). Communities who had lived in the Khumbu area for over 400 years, had already lost some access rights with the nationalization of forests in the 1950s. Luckily, the Sherpa escaped the fate suffered by other Trans Himalayan groups like the Bhotiya of the Niti Valley who had their land usurped for the Nanda Devi National Park.

This environmental imaginary represented a complete inversion of the Shangri-La mythos. Rather than a changeless society, living in peace and harmony with its natural environment, the new imaginary blamed local people for overpopulation, overgrazing, and deforestation that seemed to be plunging not only the highlands, but the entire region into an environmental supercrisis. The shepherds of the Trans Himalayas were particularly maligned for their irresponsible land management that purportedly stressed the fragile mountain ecosystems beyond their limited carrying capacity. Moreover, the new imaginary was partly prompted by the neo-Malthusian “Tragedy of the Commons” thesis that gained currency in the early 1970s. Indeed, the tale itself seemed to speak to the Himalayan condition with its ahistorical agropastoral parable of shepherds maximizing their herd sizes without thought to future consequences.

Through careful observations, the various field studies buttressed the case that Ives and other physical geographers had built during the 1980s. Beyond upending the pessimistic view of human activity propounded by THED, the researchers went further to reveal the resilience and adaptability of various Trans Himalayan peoples. That they had managed to prosper in the harsh and unforgiving terrain demonstrated their dynamism as a hardy people at the centre of vast networks of cultural exchange and trade. In addition, the ethnographic surveys could not avoid considering the complex politics around resource rights. That the government agencies, which controlled most of the region's forests did not come under the same level scrutiny, was the first indication that the THED discourse was slanted against traditional users. These ethnographies thus confirmed what had already been noted by physical and environmental geographers, that the ground realities were very different than what was and still is reported in the mainstream press.

LESSONS FROM LADAKH

On the other hand, imaginaries centered around modernization and development have also wreaked havoc on societies and ecological cycles. Especially in harsh, largely inhospitable environments such as the Trans Himalayas, massive disruptions to human-land interactions followed efforts by central authorities to integrate and develop their borderlands. However contrary to these concerns reflecting a perceptual problem on the Western conservationists and romantics, the intertwined cultural and environmental crisis has been voiced most conspicuously by local people themselves.

The recent experience of Ladakhis as famously recounted by Helena Norberg-Hodge has born out the inherent violence of imposed development imaginaries. With the recognition of their strategic position, Ladakhis were integrated on decidedly unequal terms within the larger Kashmiri and Indian national economies. With cheap foodstuff flowing on newly paved highways to local markets, the Ladakhi economy that centered on subsistence agriculture crashed. Crop systems that were meticulously cultivated in the barren countryside over centuries, were overwhelmed overnight,

leading to a loss of self-confidence and autonomy. School systems that followed contributed to the confusion with disastrously inappropriate curriculums propagated without thought to local culture and knowledge. Most disturbingly, has been the rise in communal discord between Buddhists and Muslims who had previously lived harmoniously for generations. Rather than constituting an echo of the peaceful Shangri-La theme, Ladakh scholars have noted a definite trend towards heightened communal rhetoric on the part of Buddhist communities in response to their economic and cultural marginalization (Norberg-Hodge, 2000). The rise of tourism and influx of soldiers in need of supplies have partially mitigated the economic impact, yet this has also profoundly reoriented the Ladakhi self-image and presented a whole array of new environmental challenges. Recent curriculum and political reforms that have accompanied the establishment of an autonomous hill council have also ameliorated the communal situation, although farming remains in the doldrums.

Interestingly, illegal trade across the Tibetan frontier has also resumed, with local pressures mounting on India and China to normalize this Western sector of their border. In addition, recent scholarship in historical geography has unveiled Ladakh's central role in connecting the Trans Himalayan caravans to the Silk Road in Central Asia. Like other Trans Himalayan peoples, trade supplemented the Ladakhis' animal husbandry and agriculture economically and provided them culturally with an open door to the world. In fact, the travels of a few enterprising merchant families from Leh far surpassed that of later explorers. Due to the geopolitical trends that had already become apparent by the turn of the century, their fortunes slowly declined even before the closure of the frontier in 1962 (Rizvi, 1999). As such, whether a revitalized Trans Himalayan trade can offset the dependency created by the central government for strategic purposes, remains an open question. However, any prospect for Ladakhis to revive their traditions and regain their self-esteem should be examined, especially if trade resumes and returns the Trans Himalayas to its erstwhile status as a hub of active interaction and exchange between peoples and cultures.

THE HEART OF INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Whatever the world situation proves to be ... an understanding between China and India such as exists between United States and Canada, with an agreement to de-militarize the Himalayas which are the controlling factors of both Indian and Chinese geography, would not be a only guarantee to the autonomous status of Tibet but also a stabilizing factor in the peace of the world.

— *Chinese Tibetan Specialist Li Tieh-Tseng, 1960* (Li, 1960).

This long anticipated rapprochement between India and China has been slow in coming since the 1962 border put an abrupt halt to relations across the Himalayan frontier. As cited in almost all the ethnographies of Trans Himalayan peoples, this closure cleaved their social, economic, and cultural zones in half, leading to a cataclysmic loss of culture and livelihood. Even groups in Nepal suffered due to the turmoil in Tibet and the resulting restrictions on a border that was previously permeable to local peoples. Fortunately, each group was able to cope, owing to their own spirited struggles, while some like the Sherpas and Bhotiya were able to adapt to the opportunities presented by the flourishing mountaineering and tourism industries. However, the sense of sadness and loss for the elder days has persisted.

Fortunately, with the end of the Cold War and ensuing geopolitical transformations, India and China have finally resumed substantive dialogue, moving away from contentious border issues and the status of Tibet to focus on their growing commercial trade. The first breakthrough occurred in 1992, when both sides moved to tentatively open a single pass at Lipu Lekh La in the Central sector of their disputed border. While this permitted contact between groups for the first time in over thirty years, religious pilgrims, rather than traders, quickly became the primary users of the pass leading to Lake Mansarovar and Mt. Kailash. In the following year, Shipki La in Himachal Pradesh was also opened, connecting the Buddhist Kinnaur region to Western Tibet with a motorable road along the Sutlej river. By 2003, trade through these two passes amounted to \$100 million (US) and was

expected to rise five-fold in the following five years¹² ("The Nathu La Switch," 2003). Meanwhile, plans to revisit the Western and Eastern sectors progressed slowly, although in 2003, the two countries agreed to open the contentious Nathu La in Sikkim, a move that has been resisted due to its role as Younghusband's invasion route ("The Nathu La Switch," 2003). Plans to restore access through Demchok in the Ladakh region have remained on the drawing board, yet would probably be the next link for consideration (Mohan, 2004).

“ANCIENT FUTURES” OF THE TRANS HIMALAYAS

With this gradual thaw in relations along one of the most important borders in the world, the challenges and opportunities inherent in a restored and reconfigured transnational sphere may prompt yet another evolution in our understanding of the Trans Himalayas. Some first tentative steps towards grappling with these emerging trends have been taken by establishment of academic centres such as the China-India Project at the University of Hong Kong (Jain, 2003). Other organizations such as the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in Kathmandu have catalyzed research along environment and development lines, which has since the Mohonk International Mountain Conference become the central discourse in Himalayan studies. In addition, both spiritual and adventure tourism have continued to serve as the point of entry into the region's diverse cultures, despite the severe setbacks of September 11 and the violent insurgencies in both Kashmir and Nepal.

Indeed, as demonstrated by this paper, adventurers, spiritual seekers, filmmakers, scholars, and development specialists from the West have all inscribed the uniquely majestic landscape with diverse meanings and interpretations over the last two centuries. From the early explorations who transited the continental divide separating South and Central Asia, to geographic field studies that

¹² This prediction may change as in 2004 alone, full bilateral trade has increased 85 per cent to exceed \$10 billion for the first time. While still miniscule compared to each country's trade with other partners, the rapid pace of economic growth in both countries may compel further interest in developing surface links.

embedded the region's experiences in various academic discourses, to perceptions of an environmental supercrisis and the current geopolitical thinking, the Trans Himalayas have continued to evoke a heady mix of spiritual longing and serious contemplation. While some have embarked on flights of fancy, others have attempted to give sober consideration to complex problems including those involving the welfare of the people and land they have studied. And while the former has played an instrumental role generating and maintaining profound interest in the region, it is the latter that have carried forward geographical research in new and exciting directions.

Ironically, the future of Trans Himalayan studies may lie with revisiting the region's historical evolution. While only touched upon briefly in this paper, a focus on historical geography could provide powerful insight into the processes that may reemerge with the resumption of movement of peoples, cultures, and civilizations across the Himalayan frontier. While studies along these lines have taken a back seat to contemporary environment and development challenges, it is in the consideration of these very issues where the need for further research into the region's vibrant past has been felt. Moreover, cross-cultural understanding at the heart of the Sino-Indian peace process can be broadened by conceptually considering the roof of the world as a meeting place of ideas and peoples rather than a peripheral hinterland of two irreconcilable civilizations. For the inhabitants of the Trans Himalayas, this would do much to unlock their potential and unshackle them from the weight of history that has marginalized them in their own homeland. For the field of geography, imagining this "ancient future" may represent an intriguing new chapter, one that can continue in the footsteps of an already venerable record of exploration and research.

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SEMINAL EVENTS IN RECENT TRANS HIMALAYAN EXPLORATION, RESEARCH, AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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| 1624 | Father Antonio de Andrade enters Tibet through Niti La pass. | 1970s | Roads built throughout the Trans Himalayas including the Karakoram Highway connecting Pakistan and China, Manali-Leh Highway, Khardung-La Road connecting Leh with the Siachen Glacier, and the Southern Tibetan Highway connecting Lhasa to southwesternmost Tibet. |
| 1774 | East India Company unsuccessfully attempts to establish commercial contacts with Tibet. | 1975 | India formally annexes Sikkim. |
| 1812 | Moorcroft begins extensive explorations of Trans Himalayan lands from Bokhara to Bhutan. | 1976 | Sagarmatha National Park in Khumbu region of Nepal notified. |
| 1865 | “Pundit” Nain Singh Rawat begins a decade of explorations in Tibet. | 1982 | Nanda Devi National Park in Uttaranchal State notified. |
| 1904 | Younghusband marches on Lhasa, forces Tibet open to British interests. | 1984 | Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal State notified. |
| 1905 | Hedin begins his three-year journey through Tibet. | 1986 | Mohonk International Mountain Conference clarifies the uncertainties surrounding environmental change in the Himalayas. |
| 1914 | Shimla Convention establishes the McMahon Line as the Indo-Tibetan border. | 1989 | Kashmir insurgency begins. |
| 1944 | Harrer begins his seven years in Tibet. | 1992 | Lipu Lekh La in Uttaranchal becomes first mountain pass to open since border war. |
| 1947 | Li Gotami and Lama Govinda begin two year trip through Western and Central Tibet. | 1993 | Shipki La in Kinnaur district opened to trade. |
| 1950 | China reenters Tibet & forces signing of the Seventeen Point Agreement. | 1995 | Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council formed. |
| 1954 | Panchsheel doctrine of India-China Treaty on Tibet guarantees mutual cooperation and friendship. | 1996 | Nepal Maoist insurgency begins. |
| 1957 | Chinese build highway across Aksai Chin region of Ladakh. India mutes its protests. | 1998 | Bhotiyas launch agitation to reclaim customary land rights in Nanda Devi National Park. |
| 1959 | Dalai Lama flees to India. | 2000 | Uttaranchal becomes last Himalayan region to achieve statehood. |
| 1960 | Tibetan government-in-exile established at Dharamsala in Himachal State. | 2003 | Sino-Indian rapprochement accelerates with mutual visits by leaders. |
| 1962 | India-China War closes border indefinitely. China retains Aksai Chin, but returns Northeast territories (Arunachal Pradesh to India. | | |