

ASIAN BORDERLANDS



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Conclusion

Frictions in Trans-Himalayan Studies

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Abstract

Several undercurrents run throughout this book that exemplify the types of frictions characteristic of the trans-Himalayan situation. I briefly reflect here upon four that cut across our case studies transversally and point to telling overlapping implications: livelihoods, modernity, agency, and borderlands. I argue that bringing together approaches that can build on locally rooted understandings of livelihoods, while being acceptable to the state, should be our aim. It is where the challenge lies for creating and supporting truly sustainable livelihoods and durable life projects.

Keywords: Trans-Himalayas, livelihoods, modernity, agency, borderlands, current issues

Anna L. Tsing has stated that: 'Cultures are continuously coproduced in the interactions I call "friction": the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference' (2005: 4). She added: 'As a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that a heterogeneous image and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power' (5; see also Miyasaki Porro 2010). As this book demonstrates vibrantly, in the highlands straddling the borderlines across the trans-Himalayan region, transformative pressures and frictions are reshaping on a daily basis, in known as much as in unpredictable fashion, the livelihoods of thousands of ethnic minority communities. The lives of over 150 million people are impacted directly and many more indirectly.

All these pressures are closely linked to the agrarian transition (Mohanty 2016; Kelly 2011), incorporating great market integration, and a drive toward

modernity (Taylor 1999). The frictions the agrarian transition causes and exposes across the highlands simultaneously destabilize, reformat, and mobilize responses regarding the locally rooted livelihoods of communities, their worldviews, and their alternative takes on modernity (Gaonkar 2001). People in this vast borderland on the fringes of multiple nations are constantly addressing conflicting social, political, and environmental conditions and imperatives while consistently refining their creative adaptation to change and their expertise of the ecological systems they inhabit. Far from being victims of these processes and of ecological determinism, they construct and uphold complex livelihoods and activate their agency to negotiate state policies and market normalization. In Tsing's words (2005: 5): 'Speaking of friction is a reminder of the importance of interaction in defining movement, cultural forms, and agency.'

In these highlands, as chapters in this book illustrate carefully, trans-regional modernization programs and agrarian change take place in the form of cross-border infrastructural expansion, technology transfer, and movements of capital and labor, including the intensification of agriculture and trade, expansion of credit and debt, and rural-urban migration. Concurrently, ground infrastructure is no longer the only way for the state to 'demolish distance' and reduce the 'friction of terrain,' as James C. Scott put it (2009). More and more, forms of interconnectivity are overcoming physical as much as cultural distance. Aerial routes, satellite coverage, the internet, globally linked social media, but also national education, official languages, and nationalist narratives are all refurbishing human networks. Recent books such as *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Sadan 2013), *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Yeh 2013), *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities between Nepal and India* (Shneiderman 2015), and *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands* (Turner et al. 2015) are all representative in demonstrating how people, under the relentless pressure to integrate into national projects and the liberal economies, are forming the genesis of alternative modernities.

Would it be only for the sheer number of (minority) ethnicities living in these highlands, the need is acute to gain a better understanding of how such transformative processes, considered from the widest possible range of perspectives as offered by the contributors to this book, are cross-breeding the meanings and forms of economic negotiations. Chapter after chapter investigates, questions, and draws lessons from observing in situ how transborder effects of 'making a living' nourish the simultaneous creation of flexible economies, boundary marking, and identity renewal.

Livelihoods, Modernity, Agency, Borderlands

Several undercurrents run throughout this book that exemplify the types of frictions characteristic of the trans-Himalayan situation. I briefly reflect here upon four that cut across our case studies transversally and point to telling overlapping implications.

Livelihood studies, within the framework of the agrarian transition, have revealed much regarding minority societies living on the physical and cultural margins of strong nation-states in Asia (Li 2014; Sadan 2013; Springate-Baginski and Blaikie 2013; Simon 2012; Forsyth and Michaud 2011). The agrarian transition represents a profound process of social change, including agricultural intensification and territorial expansion, increasing market integration, and accelerated processes of industrialization (Hall et al. 2011). The agrarian transition frequently involves the setting in motion of now superfluous labor from rural to urban areas where they feed into the insatiable unskilled labor market. This heightened mobility of populations is not just within national borders but also crosses them. Concurrently, there has been an intensification of regulation, as new forms of private, state, and suprastate power emerge, while these processes also intertwine with environmental changes that are modifying relationships between society and nature, as resources are valued in new ways (Rigg 2015; Li 2007). Logically, these are constant sources of friction (Tappe 2015; Cairns 2015). Livelihood studies are focusing our awareness on how such different vectors of agrarian change impact on people's ability to make a living (Champalle and Turner 2014; Turner 2012; McKinnon 2011; De Haan and Zoomers 2005). This approach brings to the fore context-specific cultures, historic specificity such as political regimes, and unique spatial dynamics such as found in highland borderlands, all impacting how people create and sustain economic and social reproduction in the trans-Himalayas (Tripathi 2015; Scoones 2009; Arce and Long 2000). As a stream of chapters in this book exemplify, a livelihoods focus also bring out spheres of institutional power, with individual actors (farmers, small-scale traders, urban informal workers, and so on) influenced by discrepancies in access to assets and information (Hann and Hart 2011).

Charles Taylor (1999) notes that to be analyzed correctly, modernity cannot be considered a-culturally, that is, outside of context. Consequently, there is no such thing as a universal form of modernity; there is instead, a range. Indeed, many anthropologists (Guy 2016; Knauff 2014; Fabian 2014; Merry 2006; Sahlin 1999) argue that instead of soaking up modernity submissively, local cultures worldwide ingeniously twist it to fit their own

worldviews. Hence, actors are changed by outside pressures, but also creatively use what power they have to interpret, adapt, and even subvert such pressures (Endicott 2015; Elliott 2014; Michaud 2012). Sally Engel Merry (2006) argues that local actors vernacularize modernity by either replicating outside models, or hybridizing them. To hybridize outside models, individuals produce a 'more interactive form, with symbols, ideologies, and organizational forms generated in one locality merging with those of other localities to produce new, hybrid institutions' (Merry 2006: 46). The novelty here does not lie in arguing that people adapt new inputs to their needs. What this collective work wants to highlight is evidence of a number of specific signatures – nearly as many as there are chapters in this book – regarding this creative process as it pans out along the mountainous borderlands of the trans-Himalayas. Such signatures are not always spelled out by the actors themselves, but may remain decipherable through their overt and covert practices.

The consideration of how global pronouncements are invested locally with fresh meaning points to the pivotal notion of agency. Agency can be synonymous with the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control over their own lives (Li 2014; Ortner 2006; Mahmood 2004). Mahmood thinks of agency as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed. Tying in meaningfully with the cultural variety shown in this book, Ortner (2006: 186) states that 'every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency.' The lesson we draw here is that agency appears and evolves in context and has to be studied in relation to the circumstances that have formed the acting subjects. Expanding on Ortner's idea of 'agency as project,' Mario Blaser (2004) proposes that communities do not just react to the state and market; they also sustain life projects. These life projects (Myers and Peterson 2016; Bruland 2012) are embedded in local histories, encompassing visions of the world and the future that are frequently distinct from those embodied by projects promoted by the state and market.

Finally, this book makes abundantly clear that borders may impose limitations, but they are also a source of opportunities. Borderland studies (Tripathi 2015; Van Schendel and De Maakerb 2014; Bal and Chambugong 2014; Rumford 2013) reveal that jurisdictional borderlines rarely represent the reality of the frontier territorial regions and cultural landscapes on either side (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013; Perkins and Rumford 2013; Walker 2009). People and institutions at the local level are part of complex,

interwoven transborder relationships with other people, communities, and ethnic groups, both within and outside of their own state (Shneiderman 2013). Our range of case studies show that border residents devise highly pragmatic ways of negotiating borderlines and related policies, such that state efforts to establish political and economic parameters for cross-border interactions are often unable to fully control everyday practices of creative livelihoods (Konrad 2015; Morehouse et al. 2004). Such transborder studies contribute to raising international awareness of ethnic ‘minority’ groups that otherwise frequently end up being misrepresented, thus disempowered (Amelina et al. 2012).

Overall, these themes have allowed us to unpack local livelihood decision making, and how it is intertwined with processes of state pressure and agrarian change. The cases help us to gain a greater understanding of how local actors vernacularize modernity and draw on their agency when adapting their livelihoods to friction processes. In turn, we gain a detailed appreciation of how the latter play out across upland borderlands, embedded in particular political, social, and cultural relationships.

Across the Trans-Himalayas

Himalayas: the *Home of Snow*, from Hindi/Sanskrit *himá* (हिम) ‘snow, ice’ and *ālaya* (आलय) ‘dwelling.’ Clearly, as Cederlöf, Drew, Shneiderman, and Smyer Yü remind us in this book, Indian heritage and influence cannot be skirted around when studying the trans-Himalayas. But today, it is the Tibet-versus-China narrative that tends to occupy the front stage in the West as much as in China itself and our book is a reflection of that state of affairs. Equally momentous is the fact that the largest portion of the highlands of Asia, geographically as much as demographically, is located within communist polities. The Marxian political credo enforced by the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao Communist Parties (Michaud 2013; Tapp 2001) entails that all ‘minority nationalities’ within their borders are categorized according to their economic performance, justifying the need to bring ‘primitive communists’ up to national levels of ‘scientific socialism’ (Mullaney 2011; MacKerras 2003; Salemink 2003). This credo underscores the political but also moral authority of the state over the high border communist fringes, validating the promotion of centrally designed, yet market-oriented production and trade – what Harvey (2005: chapter 5) calls ‘Neoliberalism “with Chinese Characteristics.”’

Within these multiethnic and multinational transborder highlands in communist countries, many minority groups have maintained lineage-based forms of social organization, living in farming communities scattered across a rugged terrain, with many communities still favoring semisubsistence economies (Brush 2007; Salemink 2001). Case studies in this book such as those by Turner, Li Yunxia, Horstmann, and Li Quanmin, focus on such societies. In harsh environmental conditions, individuals and households attempt to maintain sustainable livelihoods, often with very frugal means (Pijika et al. 2015; Michaud 2015). Others are still involved in household-based agriculture, but have also taken up cash cropping, wage work, and urban or peri-urban living to a greater degree; this is illustrated in the chapters by Galipeau, Yang, and Smyer Yü. Still, the majority continue to make use of their meticulous indigenous knowledge of food and agriculture systems while adapting to state-sponsored vectors of economic integration (McElwee 2016; Lai and Farquhar 2015; Forsyth and Walker 2008).

Elsewhere in the noncommunist trans-Himalayas (visible in the chapters by Shneiderman, Diemberger, Drew, and Smyer Yü) such modernist strategies are also prevalent, supported in these cases by the increasing inroads made by the market economy, in turn underpinning the globalization and development package. All are impacting markedly on highland livelihoods.

At Stakes

These uplands are a multiethnic space par excellence. Historical concentrations of ethnicities do exist in particular areas – Zhuang around Guangxi or Tibetans around the Tibetan Plateau for instance – but more often than not, diversity rules (Michaud et al. 2016). As such, this book asks policy makers to be more aware of how upland Asian borderland livelihoods are embedded in local cultures and practices, and crucially, how development and social policies will only yield long-term success when embracing the diversity of these cultures and practices (Michaud 2011; Van Schendel 2005). Collectively, we challenge conventional development views, as well as state-sponsored academic discourses that, typically, reflect the dominant modernist, nation-centric creeds (Rigg 2015; Gros 2012; World Bank 2009; Marschke et al. 2008). This collection, we gamble, will help enhance understandings of highland livelihoods today among state officials, academics, nongovernmental organizations, development practitioners, and other stakeholders.

Specific challenges that face the local communities being studied here are unavoidably connected to broader processes occurring across Asia's

highlands: globalization, environmental and climate change, land grabbing, border formation, urban sprawl, and urban insertion (Hall et al. 2011). These challenges translate into such social matters as forms of local power, economic opportunities, gender debates and imbalances, alternative histories, sense of place, and formal schooling versus customary education. Cultural problems connect to the commodification of cultures, identity volatility, religious distinction, the generational gap, the cultural use of technological advances, and more. How these intricate trials are resolved will greatly impact on the well-being of these populations on the margins, rural as much as urban, and determine in large part how successful local communities will be in adjusting and even thriving.

With the distinguished exception of Bhutan, official economic programs at the national level in the trans-Himalayan region are systematically attuned to the agenda of growth and progress, two pillars of the modernization process in a neoliberal world (Harvey 2005). The dominant rhetoric, after decades of applied social evolutionism and civilizational rhetoric adopted by capitalism and Marxism alike, has been swapped for the morally based language of development – human, economic, intellectual, and sanitary (Escobar 1995). Scores of actors and agencies from the affluent world come knocking at the door to offer their goods and projects, the indispensable ‘expert knowledge’ of this industry being relentlessly reiterated, endorsed, and reified (Rigg 2015). All such initiatives, well intentioned as they may be, play directly into the national governments’ strategies of absorbing margins into the national economy and the nation (Scott 2009).

Contributors to this book have all addressed these burning issues, some one at a time but more often, in clusters that reflect an inescapable complexity on the ground. The principle guiding the selection of these case studies has been to work from the ground up, putting local situations against a shared backdrop. The editors here bank on the heuristic value of case studies firmly rooted in places, cultures, and histories. Not with the intention of turning them into debatable evidence highlighting global truths but instead, to emphasize that locality, singularity, intangibility, and an absence of statistical validity should not be discarded as weaknesses, but have a well-deserved place in the methodological toolbox of development. As I noted a few years ago (Michaud 2011: 219, 225), time and again through highly varied circumstances, ethnically rooted agency appears as a key factor in the local interpretations and translations of global commands and engagements. Taking culture and ethnicity into account when working to acquire an in-depth knowledge of local societies is vital simply because, alongside local politics and history, culture, ethnicity and agency play

core roles in livelihood decision making (Escobar 2001). Yet these features are frequently ignored or dismissed in development initiatives. Bringing together approaches that can build on locally rooted understandings of livelihoods, while being acceptable to the state, should be the aim. It is where the challenge lies for creating and supporting truly sustainable livelihoods and durable life projects.

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