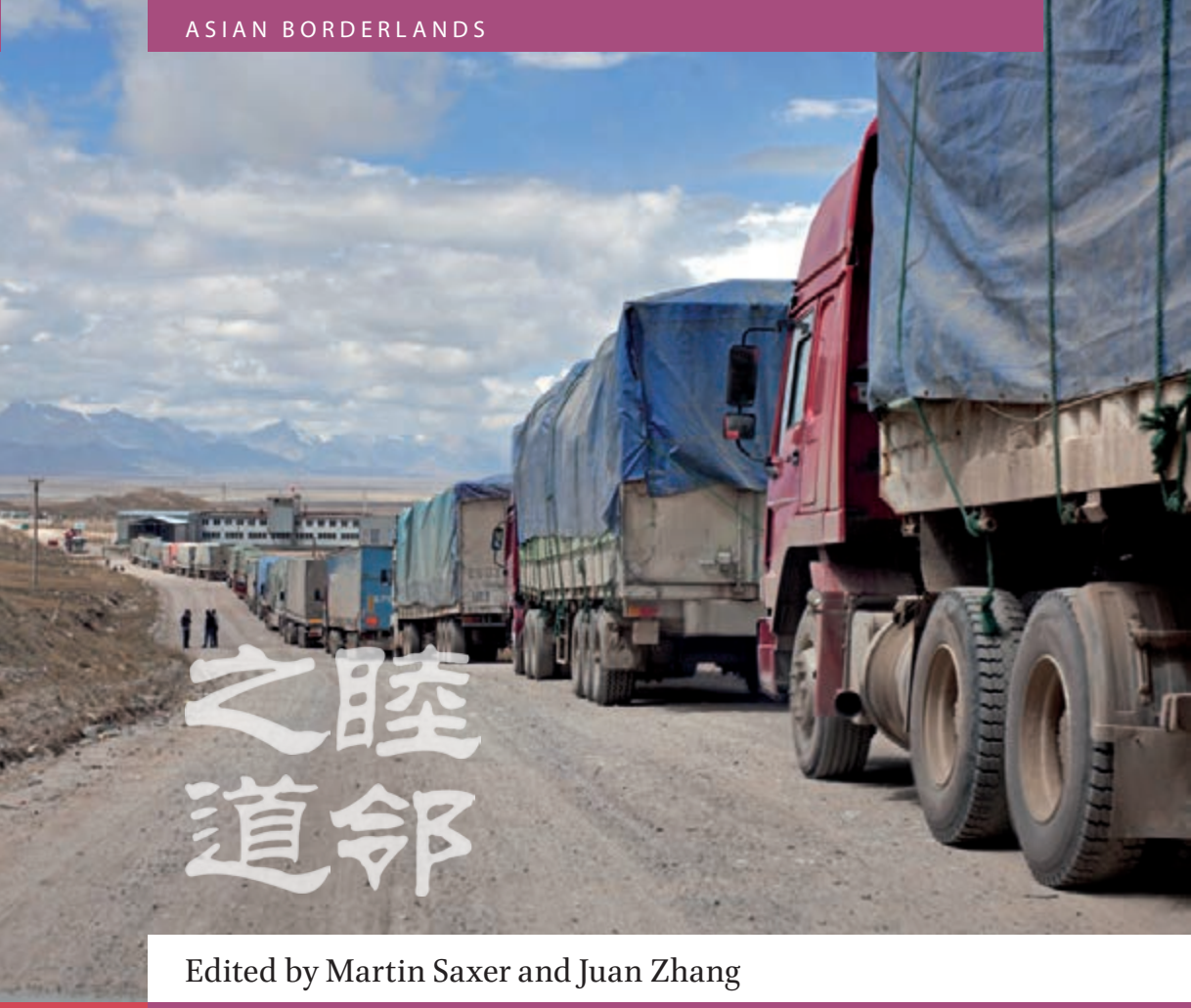
ASIAN BORDERLANDS




Edited by Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang

# The Art of Neighbouring

## Making Relations Across China's Borders

Amsterdam University Press

The Art of Neighbouring

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*Making Relations Across China's Borders*

*Edited by*
*Martin Saxer and Juan Zhang*

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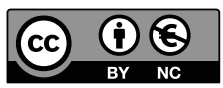


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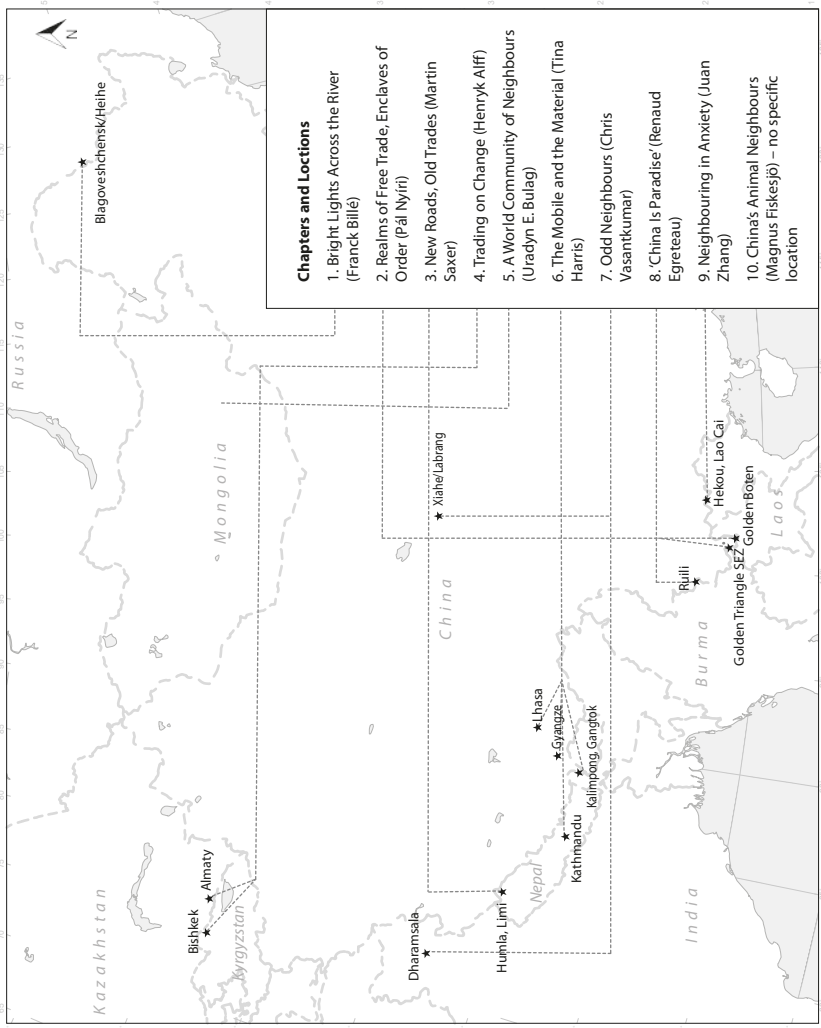
# Chapters and Locations

**Figure o.1 Overview map of locations**




Design: Martin Saxer, 2016

# Foreword and Acknowledgements

This book is the fruit of a long journey that started with a conference entitled "The Art of Neighbouring: Old Crossroads and New Connections along the PRC's borders" held at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, in March 2012. This conference brought together scholars of different disciplines and regions and developed a comparative perspective on the ways in which China's rapid economic growth, its strategic decisions to foster trade, secure influence, and access natural resources affect the lives and futures of the people living on both sides along its borders. China has in recent years embarked on a more assertive approach to redefine its role in the region. At the same time, China's strategy to portray its rise as peaceful and benevolent continues to be relevant. These at times contradictory realities are the starting point for the contributors of this book to reflect on the common experiences and situated practices of neighbouring China.

Much of the current discussion on China's rise and its growing global and regional influence concerns geopolitical and macroeconomic issues; it is largely based on state-centred policies and the various nuances of official rhetoric. Yet an important part that is missing in the discussion is the borderland itself and the people dwelling there. Borderlands are crucial junctures through which the increasing flows of raw materials, commodities and people are channelled. Looking from the borderlands back to the centres contributes to new insights into the region's dynamic interconnectedness.

This book investigates the various meanings and modalities of neighbouring across Chinese borders. The title of this book suggests that neighbouring is an art of mediating relations against the background of peace and turmoil, hopes and fears. Neighbouring, as the contributors of this book show, helps us recognize evolving interactions between nations, territories, geo-political positionalities, historical connections, movements of people, as well as locally narrated identities.

This book would not have been possible without the efforts and patience of all contributors who have worked tirelessly over the years on this project. As editors, we wish to thank the Asia Research Institute for organizing the 2012 conference, and especially Prasenjit Duara and Brenda Yeoh for their support. Our thanks also go to Liang Yongjia, Malini Sur, Philip Fountain, Hyunjoon Shin, Max Hirsh, Dru Gladney, Oscar Martinez, Tom Cliff, Xiang Biao, Jeffrey Robin, Itty Abraham, T.G. Suresh, Thongchai Winichakul, Chris Lyttleton, Wang Gungwu, Michael Feener, and Johan Lindquist for

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# Introduction

## Neighbouring in the Borderworlds along China's Frontiers

*Juan Zhang and Martin Saxer*

> For it is a simple matter to love one's neighbour when he is distant, but it is a different matter in proximity. – Jacques-Alain Miller (1994)

> A near neighbour is more helpful than distant kin. – A Chinese proverb

Over the past decades, living in proximity to an increasingly powerful China has gained new meanings. 'Rising China' – the nation, the notion, and the buzzword – sparks dreams and triggers fears. Borders that were closed during the Cold War era have again become zones of contact and exchange. Old trade routes are revived, new economic corridors established, and remote border towns turned into special zones. Tales of entrepreneurial success spread wide and stimulate hopes for trans-regional development. At the same time, security concerns remain high, territorial disputes still loom large, and minorities from northern Burma to Tibet, Xinjiang and Tajikistan continue to seek autonomy.

In this context, engaging in multiple neighbouring relations has become a necessity for those living in these zones of contact and exchange. The experiences and realities of relation-making across China's borders shape life in profound and lasting ways. However, these experiences and realities of everyday neighbouring receive less analytic attention than they deserve. Current debates on China's relations with its neighbours tend to focus on questions of economic influence, military power, and diplomatic strategies; both academic and public attention is directed towards topics such as China's territorial claims in the South China Sea or China's new regional initiatives such as 'One Belt One Road' (*yidai yilu* 一带一路) that aims to revive the Silk Road and gain influence in Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Smaller-scale processes of exchange along the 22,000 km of land borders that 14 countries share with China usually remain out of sight. At best, they make headlines as individual cases of economic success or political unrest; hardly ever are they put in relation to each other. Everyday interaction and exchange across the Himalayas, for example, is seldom seen against the background of similar experiences in Siberia or Burma.

The oversight of important everyday processes of neighbouring along the edges of Asia's rising powers, and the lack of a comparative framework to capture them, are the challenges this book seeks to address. This book starts with a simple question: What does China's rise mean for its immediate neighbours? Looking beyond extensive political analysis prepared by think tanks, and newspaper headlines on high level summits, trade deals, collaborations and disputes, this book presents lived realities of shared dreams and fears. Authors of this book bring forward a comparative framework that allows us to understand seemingly disparate processes in places as far apart as Kyrgyzstan and northern Vietnam as pieces of a larger puzzle. Rather than treating the frontier zones as remote peripheries at the edge of nation-states, we conceptualize them as crucial junctures that hinge a considerable part of Asia together. We argue that these junctures present a vantage point to see and understand the dynamic and ongoing reconfiguration of post-Cold War Asia in new ways.

Our aim with this book is thus two-fold. First, we seek to gain a better understanding of the contemporary cross-border relations at various scales. We look into everyday practices of exchange and interaction and ask what China's rise means for the people living on both sides of the borders, how their lives and futures are conditioned by the geopolitics of post-Cold-War Asia, and which strategies they employ to deal with new regimes of control and (partially) open borders.

Second, we propose neighbouring as an analytical notion for an anthropological inquiry into relatedness, competition, and ways of being in a world in which communities become increasingly mobile and connected. As it stands, neighbouring has remained an under-theorized social relation. While many forms of neighbouring are implicitly at the core of classic anthropological studies, they have mostly been discussed in terms of kinship (especially ethnographic writings of 'fictive kinship'), ethnicity, nation, class, caste or community. In other disciplines, neighbouring has not been studied in its own right, despite the fact that the term appears frequently in international relations (IR), politics, security studies and urban planning.

This book takes the experiences and politics of relation-making across China's borders as a starting point of an anthropological inquiry into neighbouring. Neighbouring is thereby understood as both agency and experience. It involves, at once, mental and material processes; it entails techniques of negotiating proximity and makes use of asymmetries in power and wealth; it informs desire and stimulates distrust; and it denotes

collective and individual efforts to manage evolving relations that we will call agonistic intimacies.

In this introduction, we first discuss how neighbours and neighbouring are defined, and trace the historical roots of neighbouring between China and its neighbours by looking into the meta-narrative of tributary relations and the question of governance and autonomy. Then, we situate the terrain of our inquiry in the borderworlds that straddle Chinese frontiers and sketch out the geopolitical transformation of post-Cold War Asia as the backdrop against which contemporary neighbouring unfolds. On the basis of this brief sketch of historical background and post-Cold War context, we explore the contemporary characteristics of neighbouring relations. We look into the politics of proximity and distance, and reflect on agonistic intimacies that define neighbours and neighbouring. We conclude this introduction with an overview of the chapters, showing how each of them helps illuminate the larger project of the book.

## The Neighbour

Before we delve into an analysis of 'neighbouring' or even 'the art of neighbouring' as a shared experience and practice, it is important to first define who is a 'neighbour' and what it means to be a 'neighbour'. The term neighbour, derived from the old English word nēahgebūr – the peasant (gebūr) who dwells near (nēah) – suggests social relations based on the spatial proximity of fixities such as households or estates. In Chinese, neighbour, or *linju* (邻居) also describes social relations defined by living in close quarters. 'Lin' (邻) indicates a basic community unit of five households (*wujia weilin*五家为邻) according to *Shuowen*, (an early second-century Chinese dictionary from the Han Dynasty) that are adjacent to one another. The neighbour is often associated with friendliness and kindness, a sense of connectedness and shared responsibility. Neighbourly relations are thus often thought of as being equal, respectful, and mutually helpful. The Chinese proverb 'a near neighbour is more helpful than distant kin' (*yuanqin buru jinlin* 远亲不如近邻) describes precisely the kind of intimate relations between near neighbours. Much of the current IR scholarship and political analysis continues to evaluate China's 'Good Neighbour Diplomacy' through this seemingly innocent notion (for example Zhu 2010).

However, neighbours and neighbouring are never innocent or simple. It may be easy to 'love one's neighbour when he's distant', just as

Jacques-Alain Miller (1994) describes, but it is a different matter in proximity. Uradyn Bulag's writing (Chapter 5, this volume) on Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour Diplomacy' offers some interesting insights on the politics of proximity, equality, and 'friendship' in neighbouring situations. Mongolia is a country endowed with world-class coal, copper and uranium deposits. It is also a country wedged between two mighty neighbours – China and Russia. Both neighbours have a strong interest in exercising influence and extracting natural resources from Mongolia. As a counter strategy, Mongolia chooses to seek support among potential 'third neighbours', particularly the United States of America (USA) and Japan. As a small state, Mongolia is willing to share its 'fortune sovereignty' – mainly its rich natural resources – with its neighbours both near and far as a means of balancing power positions and influence. For Mongolia, far 'neighbours' such as the USA and Japan, and now increasingly member countries of the European Union, may be much more lovable than close neighbours Russia and China. But it also borrows strength and support strategically from Russia and China in a moment of need. The case of Mongolia shows the kind of complicated and strategic relations between neighbours.

Indeed, there are neighbours who live in close proximity, and neighbours who are worlds apart. There are neighbours that are strong, and neighbours that are weak. There are neighbours who are cooperative and friendly, and neighbours who are disrespectful and obnoxious. The neighbour is always a familiar presence. But one never knows who the neighbour really is and what the neighbour might do in different times and situations. Just as the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it: 'there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness beneath the "neighbour"' (Žižek 2005: 143). Veena Das (2007) in her writing about the 1984 massacre of Sikhs in India demonstrated that some neighbours are capable of turning into unexpected traitors and murderers. There is always a looming suspicion about neighbours, who they really are and what they can do, which challenges the popular imaginaries of neighbourly harmony and equality. The neighbour therefore is a complex figure that is both intimate and suspicious. This paradoxical characteristic about the neighbour renders neighbouring an inherently paradoxical and unstable experience, one that needs constant negotiation, reinforcement, commitment, and performance of innocence and good-will. The art of neighbouring thus entails collective sensibility and situated practicality where neighbours carefully manage their relations and negotiate shifting power positions.

## Neighbouring: Maintaining Closeness Near and Far

As the neighbour is a figure of ambivalence, neighbouring as an experience and a daily practice is also fraught with ambivalence and contradictions. By definition, neighbouring indicates close relations that are often determined by spatial fixities – dwellings, estates, and households; but these seemingly 'fixed' relations can be surprisingly elastic or fluid.

Today, when we talk about neighbouring relations between nation-states, a sense of closeness is often measured by how different bodies are brought together in immediate contact – often at border crossings, via bridges and roads, in special zones, dry ports, and marketplaces. These physical locations seem to suggest that interactions of neighbours are always confined by spatial fixities and, as a result, the patterns of such close-contact interactions are bounded and predictable.

However, we show in this book that neighbouring does not necessarily imply fixed engagement and predictable interaction. Authors of this book pay attention to movements and the fluidity of social situations. Neighbouring can take the form of periodical encounters, or it can emerge from an initially close contact that continues to be maintained across distance. Neighbouring may also take place far away from the national borders but still remain functionally linked to particular opportunities and risks presented by locations, just as Bulag's chapter on Mongolia demonstrates (Chapter 5, this volume). Another case in point is the bazaar traders in Bishkek and Almaty described by Henryk Alff (Chapter 4, this volume). Alff shows how the closeness of neighbouring relations does not correlate with spatial fixities. After the opening of the borders between China and Central Asia in the 1990s, local shuttle trade was the predominant form of cross-border engagement. Later on, wholesale traders gradually took over and the zones of contact moved away from the immediate borders to the more distant bazaars of Bishkek and Almaty. Close relations with traders in China however remain active and meaningful. The rhetoric of trust is established in this particular situation to facilitate processes of 'neighbouring at a distance'. It consolidates partnerships, maintains ties, and to a certain extent resolves disputes.

In one way or another, proximity, or 'closeness', remains a condition for neighbouring. However, this 'closeness' cannot be measured in kilometres or miles. It does not describe a static constellation but a relatively malleable condition; it indicates that one has entered a state of being with others and has to bear subsequent social and political implications. Neighbouring, in this sense, is diligent 'border work' (Reeves 2014) that stretches across

spaces near and far. Moreover, such closeness by no means implies equality or harmony. In fact, asymmetry and tension are far more characteristic for neighbouring than harmony and equality. The spectre of violence all to easily come to haunt even longstanding neighbours, as, for example, Lee Ann Fujii's exemplary study of the chaos and killing during the horrific genocide in Rwanda in the mid-1990s shows (Fujii 2009). Collective violence and profound sympathy are often bred together in closeness. In extreme conflicts, some neighbours commit mass violence against people they know intimately, as others become protectors.

Neighbouring is an inherently unstable and unpredictable social relation. Compared to kinship, for example, it is less firmly rooted in incontrovertible moralities. It is precisely for this reason, one could argue, that the rhetorical invocation of good neighbourliness so often employs the language of kinship. But firm invocations of a brotherly bond or other familial ties always risk to be seen as just that – rhetorical strategies that seek to hide the disharmony embedded in closeness inherent in neighbouring relations.

## Neighbouring: Contesting Intimacies

Neighbouring entails a particular form of intimacy, one that is neither radically antagonistic nor particularly harmonious under ordinary circumstances. On the one hand, neighbours continue to rely on closeness to seek common ground and mutual interest; on the other hand, it cannot be ruled out that neighbouring relations may one day turn into open enmity, when borders close, ambassadors are withdrawn, and people become refugees. There is constant subterranean tension that haunts neighbourly relations as anxiety and doubts co-exist with friendly gestures and vows of trust. Neighbouring describes relations that entail what Bhrigupati Singh (2011) calls 'agonistic intimacy', which can be both unsettling and productive.

Singh's concept brings together the notion of contest (*agon* in Greek) with the idea of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005). It helps make sense of situations in which conflict remains 'co-present with modes of relatedness' and shared aspirations (Singh 2011: 431). Such situations are very common in the borderworlds this book is concerned with. Despite xenophobic suspicions and envious gazes in Siberia, the lingering fears of disruption and instability in the margins of India, the continuing anxiety in northern Vietnam, or new asymmetries in the Himalayas, agonistic intimacies define what it means to live in each other's proximity.

Neighbourly agonism operates at both local and transnational scales, activating antagonism and inspiration at the same time. It threatens relations but also consolidates ties. This is what Bonnie Honig calls the 'affirmative dimensions of contestation' (Honig 1993: 15). When borderland communities compete for resources, rights, status and power, it is often the perpetuated contest itself that becomes the foundation of 'neighbourly' intimacy. The 'in-betweenness' of borderworlds, as Chris Vasantkumar calls it (chapter 7, this volume), fosters both ruthless capitalist competition and surprising solidarities at the same time.

Juxtaposing both imaginaries of harmony and what Žižek calls the 'unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness', we focus on the plurality of relations and actions in the contact zones between China and its neighbours (Pratt 1991). We turn our focus on what makes neighbours embrace shared dreams, voice similar doubts, and take similar precautions. We argue that it is not the 'distinct features' of neighbours at the margins – whether cultural, primordial, or a response to state oppression – that matter most, but the specific agonistic intensities rooted in the positionality of neighbouring relations and the skills to mediate and make use of them.

## Neighbouring: Negotiating Asymmetries

Another key characteristic of neighbouring relations is the innate power asymmetries between neighbours that are in need of constant balancing and negotiation. These acts of balancing and negotiation often become the foundational terms of engagement. Rather than equals, neighbours occupy different power positions and are in constant motion to challenge or overturn, maintain or take advantage of the inherent power imbalances.

The earlier patterns of neighbourly engagements between China and its neighbours were most famously theorized by the venerable historian John King Fairbank and his followers as a 'tributary system' (*chaogong tixi* 朝贡体系).[1] Simply put, the 'tributary system' is a meta-narrative that postulates a sinocentric view of neighbourly interaction among pre-modern polities: China, as the superior power and civilization, is placed in the centre; its neighbours are situated at various scales of peripheriality. As subordinates, they pay tribute to the empire to show reverence and allegiance. In

1 Feng Zhang points out that the term 'tributary system' is a Western invention, which is translated back into Chinese as *chaogong tixi*. The terms *chao* and *gong* often appear separately in Chinese historical sources, but they did not form a 'system' as such; See Zhang (2009).

exchange, they are granted trade rights and protection, and are bestowed with gifts, investiture, and royal acknowledgement, through which, in turn, the emperor reinforces his authority and legitimacy as the benevolent, celestial ruler ordained (Fairbank 1968, Kang 2010).

Trade, in particular, was an important imperial technique in pacification and peacekeeping. Reserved as an exclusive entitlement to the tribute states that swore allegiance and loyalty to the central empire, trade became useful in ruling frontiers, consolidating allies, and maintaining the regional order (Frank 1998, Hamashita 2008, Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011). Trade and tribute were deemed to be 'cognate aspects of a single system of foreign relations' – 'the moral value of tribute being the more important in the minds of the rulers of China, and the material value of trade in the minds of the barbarians' (Fairbank and Teng 1941: 140-141).

Fairbank's conceptualization of the tributary system in pre-modern Asia gained tremendous popularity and influence in the 1960s. As archetypal 'Chinese world order' and model for Chinese diplomacy it had a lasting effect on IR scholarship and the social sciences. However, its unabashed sinocentric views, essentializing frameworks, and simplistic understanding of the dynamic practices of trans-empire engagements also attracted considerable criticism (see e.g. Hamashita 2005, Hevia 1995, Rossabi 1983, Wang 1983, Wills 1988, 2001).

Fairbank and his followers portrayed pre-modern China as an 'empire without neighbours' (Fairbank and Twitchett 1980: 182), in the sense that China was surrounded by foreigners who were mostly 'barbarians' and who could only be dealt with by enforcing the strict terms of tributary interaction. Critical historical accounts, however, contradict this view and show that the modes of interaction between China and its neighbours varied drastically with ever changing motivations, ambitions, and interests (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006, Giersch 2006, Hevia 1995, Lary 2008, Perdue 2005, Rossabi 1983, Shin 2006).

During periods when pre-modern China was powerful and stable, formal tribute relations may have determined much of the asymmetrical but predictable terms of engagement between China and its surrounding polities. However, these terms did not necessarily mean that the 'smaller' neighbours were disadvantaged in interaction. The Mongols, for example, fully exploited their intermittent tributary relations with the Ming empire for not only gaining wealth and protection, but also for their own interests in defeating rival polities and expanding power on the steppe (Serruys 1967). The institutionalization of tribute relations neither elevated China's anxiety towards its neighbours' willingness to submit, not did it ease the

hostility and suspicion that these neighbours felt towards China. (For contemporary examples of neighbourly anxieties under friendship diplomacies, see Chapters 1 and 9 in this book).

During periods when China was weakened by internal unrest, wars, and famine, neighbouring practices at the state level turned out to be extremely flexible and pragmatic. The political and military weakness of the Song dynasties, for example, was translated into a more realistic foreign policy when Chinese imperial officials treated neighbouring states as their equals (Rossabi 1983). In many circumstances when state-level interactions ceased to operate, unofficial connections persisted through trade and exchange (Hamashita 2005, Swope 2002).

In brief, the tributary system does explain certain patterns and politics, but as Feng Zhang nicely put it, 'much of the interesting interaction between China and its neighbours occurred outside of it' (Zhang 2009: 562). The scholarly works of Eric Tagliacozzo and Takeshi Hamashita, for example, clearly demonstrate that pirates and labourers had just as profound an effect on pre-modern Asian geopolitics as the state, and everyday interactions that took place at state peripheries played a pivotal role in shaping regional and global networks (Hamashita 2008, Tagliacozzo 2009, Tagliacozzo and Chang 2011).

Today, no one would describe China's interactions with its neighbours through the framework of tributary relations. What dominates the public discourse now is the so-called 'Good Neighbourly Diplomacy' and mutual development. But China's discourse of the 'peaceful rise' is still reminiscent of the past rhetoric of tributary interactions (Wills 2011). As a modern twist of 'ruling by virtue', China is believed to be exercising its regional influence through what Joseph Nye (2004) calls 'soft power'. Trade, and perhaps now 'development', continues to be a state technique that aims at 'benevolent governing' and the insurance of peace and order in the frontiers.

Inherent in this new phase of sinocentrism is still the old lens through which China's neighbours are viewed. No longer 'barbarians', they are now called or thought of as 'under-developed' nations, weak states, hill tribes, and minority nationalities. Today, the imperial image of barbarian tribes to be civilized or subdued may have given way to a more benign rhetoric of development and cultural preservation; however, the underlying dialectic of neighbouring relations between asymmetric powers continues to be relevant.

China's rise in recent decades has indeed reconfigured new asymmetries and modes of engagement in Asia; but we believe that the resulting realities can only be understood if we take into consideration local meanings and

situated encounters. Just as the model of the 'tributary system' in itself is incapable of explaining the complex dynamics of China-foreign interactions in the past, China's 'peaceful rise' and its exercise of 'soft power' falls short in exemplifying contemporary China-foreign relations. It cannot capture the multiplicities of relations and evolving politics between China and its neighbours. A more productive approach, we believe, is to look beyond analysis that originates from the powerful 'centre' and start focusing instead on the peripheries.

## Neighbouring: Engaging the Margins

To shift our focus to the peripheries, it is worthwhile to examine, first and foremost, how the peripheries are defined and mapped, by whom, and for whose interest this has been normalized and naturalized as if it represents social reality. Classification, masked as objective science and carried out with utmost authority by power centres, is a project that conditions and perpetuates power asymmetries.

A common feature of most of the peripheries of nation-states is the imposed and often arbitrary classification of their inhabitants as 'ethnic groups', 'hill tribes' or 'minority nationalities'. This classificatory enterprise, which already underpinned the political projects of Chinese, Russian, and British imperial expansion, was eagerly adopted by modern nation-states and continues to resonate with popular imaginaries of the 'remote' and 'tribal' both in the East and the West (see, for example, Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 2006, Harrell 1995, Lary 2008).

The enterprise of ethnic classification represents one dimension of neighbouring, namely between elites in mostly national centres of power claiming civilizational superiority and their archetypal Other in the periphery. Inherent in this enterprise is a particular conceptualization in which the remote becomes the location of the Other, whose 'strangeness' and imagined 'isolation' justify the dominant political structure of power.

One of the most radical attempts to shift attention away from centres and look instead at margins is James Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), which he describes as an 'anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia'. Following van Schendel (2002), Scott uses the term Zomia for the uncharted contact zones between the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and Southwest China. Scott takes socio-linguistically diverse Zomia not as a conglomerate of primordial tribes, but as the result of flexible communities who consciously 'opted out' of state rule. Until the advent

of roads and airplanes, he argues, the mountainous areas along much of the present day borders of the People's Republic of China (PRC) served as refuge for those who chose a lifestyle different from lowland civilizations. According to Scott, the 'tribes' in the mountains are thus a result of in-migration and ethnogenesis, an effect of oppressive taxes and corvée obligations in the valley states. Turning the idea of cultural determinism on its head, Scott frames the distinctive features of hill societies, including swidden agriculture, millenarian movements, a relatively egalitarian social structure, and oral instead of written histories, as deliberate mechanisms to 'escape' state authority. In Scott's model of Zomia, seeking refuge is the motive that characterizes relation-making between lowland centres and highland margins.

Scott's provocative and sharp reflections on upland agency are insightful and relevant for the project at hand. However, they explicitly deal only with the pre-World War II era and concern but a section of our terrain of inquiry. Moreover, we also find Scott's thesis neglecting a crucial dimension that is necessary to understand the dynamics in the borderworlds described in this book. While 'opting out' is certainly one motivation that brought (and continues to bring) people to the rugged peripheries, other equally strong motivations were and are the manifold opportunities found in borderworlds – be it in trade, natural resources or tourism (Giersch 2006, 2010, Kolås 2008). The motive of 'seeking fortune', for example, has been at least as important as the motive of 'seeking refuge'.

Fortune seeking, however, is tied to connectivity and exchange rather than to remoteness and isolation. In this context, 'not being governed' indicates a particular relational politics that is often rather a matter of skilfully mediating the presence of strong outside powers than openly escaping them. In other words, 'not being governed' while still engaging in active exchange relations often does imply a certain amount of being governed – at least nominally. What is at stake is rather a strategy of not being governed too much or too rigidly. As openly opting out of state powers became increasingly difficult after World War II, this mode of skilful neighbouring with the intention of being nominally but flexibly governed is arguably even more important today. This is how remote and 'underdeveloped' – even 'backward' – peripheries get tax deductions and flexible policies, how they build roads and power grids, how they establish special zones and economic belts, and become sites of eco-tourism and heritage preservation. 'Governing' is a notion too rigid to describe the malleable, contested, situational strategies that local societies use to mediate the presence of strong power. We propose that 'neighbouring' can better describe

how power asymmetries are managed at the local level. It indicates an interactive process, often with unpredictable results. Unlike 'governing', it does not assume superiority or hegemonic control. It simply describes the relational interaction of power players and how they engage with each other with their own agency, resourcefulness, and performativity.

The performance of loyalty and harmony combined with a strong emphasis on visual appearances are crucially important in neighbouring relations this respect, as several of the contributions in this volume suggest. Pál Nyíri (Chapter 2), for example, describes how the ceremonies, banners and even the uniforms of security guards in a privately owned Special Economic Zone at the border in northern Laos mimetically replicate the paraphernalia of the Chinese state. This form of posturing bears similarities to the Zomian strategies of appeasing lowland states that Scott describes (Scott 2009: 7-11). The difference is that establishing a Special Economic Zone requires close contact with state authorities. Today, posturing and rhetoric only work as long as there is legal endorsement and high-level official support. Essentially, the art of (not) being governed in the peripheries is about managing power asymmetries and organizing multiple relations at the margins. This is what we call the art of neighbouring.

## Neighbouring in the Post-Cold War World

The geography of contemporary social life, Willem van Schendel (2002) aptly remarks, has outgrown the contours of the postwar world map. New and possibly discontinuous 'regions', such as 'lattices, archipelagos, hollow rings, or patchworks' need to be visualized to overcome the 'contiguity fetish of prevailing regional schemes' (van Schendel 2002: 658). The borderworlds along China's edges – as the terrain of inquiry this book proposes – is reminiscent of such an archipelago or a hollow ring. The majority of processes and events analysed in the ten chapters of this book cut across the territorial boundaries of nation-states and the artificial lines that demarcate area studies disciplines. In this way, this volume seeks to transcend 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) and shed light on the 'geographies of ignorance' (van Schendel 2002) at the fringes of nation-states and disciplines.

This book does not ignore the relevance of national geographies; instead, it 'jumps scales' (ibid.) and assembles large regions across Southeast, South, Central, East and Far East Asia into a 'world area' that was and still is at the heart of state formation. Given the fact that mobile communities

existed before any modern states were formed (Ludden 2003), we consider neighbouring not as a geographically bounded experience, but as sets of overlapping relations that are subject to movement and change. Neighbouring, as we understand it, entails both a geographical reality of living in proximity, and a flexible construction of social relations that can be stretched across time, space, and distance. The stories of Tibetan returnees in Amdo, Tibet (Vasantkumar, Chapter 7 of this volume), for instance, show that borderworld interactions between mobile actors require a more widely drawn geography. Thus, the configuration of neighbouring relations in our inquiry has less to do with geographically bounded areas 'neighbouring each other'; it rather concerns a social topography of communities and connections as people migrate and stay. The peripheries portrayed in this book are worlds in motion, and the art of neighbouring is almost always tied to changing social relations as people and things move.

When we depict neighbouring as a shared experience and a common reality in the peripheries along China's edges, we mostly focus on the contemporary conditions of this experience in the context of post-Cold War geopolitics in Asia. Large parts of China's contemporary land borders are the result of imperial and colonial claims and treaties (Woodman 1969). The red lines drawn on modern maps often arbitrarily separated territories and peoples. Before World War II, such artificial borderlines were often cast as irrelevant and had little to do with everyday realities on the ground (Lary 2008). Frontiers and contact zones were under fuzzy sovereign rule and mostly beyond the administrative reach of central powers. Since the 1950s, however, this situation changed. The newly founded nation-states set out to militarize frontier zones with clearly demarcated borders. The fuzzy territories of erstwhile empires were turned into carefully guarded zones of national sovereignty. A series of border disputes and armed conflicts between China and its neighbouring nation-states ensued, most notably with India (1962), the Soviet Union (1969), and Vietnam (1979). These conflicts resulted in a period of curtailment and closure at China's edge. Longstanding ties and formal networks of exchange were severed considerably; in some cases, former neighbours turned into bitter enemies.

After the end of the Cold War, and especially since China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, the political sensitivities of borders, while still lingering, were gradually superimposed by expectations of prosperity. In this context, drastic changes took place across the borderworlds. Sino-Vietnamese relations were normalized in 1992. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001. Border disputes between Russia and China were mostly resolved in 2004. The Nathula Pass

between Sikkim and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) reopened in 2006. Railways and road networks were expanded into territories that were formerly difficult to access. Casinos, mines and rubber plantations emerged. And new pipelines, dams and power grids were built to channel energy into these zones of development (Diana 2009, Garver 2006, Harris 2008, Lyttleton and Nyíri 2011, Nyíri and Breidenbach 2008, Zatsepine 2008).

A quarter of a century after 1989, notions of 'opening up' and multilateral collaboration have mostly replaced the ideological framework of containment – if not by choice then by public demand or perceived economic necessity. Stimulated by this momentum, frontier communities that were used to orient themselves toward Moscow, Delhi, Hanoi, or Kathmandu started looking toward China for new connections. Simultaneously, people within China directed their gaze to the border zones in search of emerging opportunities (Zhang 2011).

From tributary relations in the past to contemporary practices of (not) being governed, people, networks, and even institutions act upon multiple scales. China's rise in recent decades has produced new modes of engagement in Asia; however, the resulting realities can only be understood if we take into consideration local meanings and situated encounters.

When Veena Das wrote about the remaking of selves in the realm of the everyday, she showed that it is revealed not by grand gestures of transformation, but through a 'descent into the ordinary' (Das 2007: 7). Celebratory state policies and ambitious international frameworks aside, neighbouring is inherently such a descent into the ordinary and the everyday, at the interstices of multiple relations and dynamic actions. It is important to keep a critical distance from sino- or eurocentric views and the veiled sense of moral superiority embedded in both Chinese 'peaceful rise' discourse and Western 'development' rhetoric. What is at stake, instead, is to bring to light the multiplicities and complexities of relation-making in the borderworlds at China's edge. In this sense, this book aspires to offer parallax views and multilayered perspectives.

## Structure of the Book

The ten contributions in this volume are structured in three sections to illuminate three aspects of neighbouring described above. The first section explores the emergent borderworlds in the context of China's rise and opening-up. Examples from Siberia, the Himalayas and northern Laos show the gamut of 'neighbouring China' in a post-Cold War context. These

examples also shed light on the dialectics of centres and margins, as well as how neighbours forge relations through drastic social change.

Chapter 1 by Franck Billé, opens with an emblematic image of this neighbouring situation: the residents of the Siberian city of Blagoveshchensk gaze across the Amur River and see the bright and sparkling neon lights of Heihe, a border town in north-eastern China. Two decades ago, Heihe was a dark village at China's periphery; now it is a booming hub thanks to border trade. Heihe's neon lights, which allegedly run on cheap Russian electricity, render the ambivalence that Blagoveshchensk residents felt towards China visible. At Russia's edge, they feel neglected and far removed from the centre. And the transformation of Heihe seems to suggest a different possibility for a city at the nation's margin. For some of the Blagoveshchensk residents, the sparkling lights in Heihe symbolize the problems of neighbouring China; for others, they signal the ushering in of a new kind of modernity associated with China's economic confidence. The lights beckon a future where everything seems possible but, at the same time, also provide a reflection on current asymmetries. Billé explores both the friction between the twin cities and the ways in which they mimetically refer to each other.

The importance of visual appearances and mimicry in the art of neighbouring is also a topic in Pál Nyíri's account of two casino complexes in northern Laos. Both complexes were established as Special Economic Zones by Chinese entrepreneurs on leased land on the Lao side of the Lao-China border. Nyíri shows how the zones' management deploys 'simulacra of development' and the 'paraphernalia of the Chinese state' to position themselves favourably between Laos and the PRC. Although the zones are dependent on gambling and prostitution for revenue, their ambitions are couched in images of spearheading modernity. These images tie in with the development agendas of both states and, at once, keep them at arms length. While in one casino zone the strategy seems to work, in the other it fell out of favour with the Chinese authorities and witnessed a rapid decline.

A pervasive rhetoric of development also forms the backdrop against which recent changes in northwestern Nepal have to be understood. Martin Saxer describes in Chapter 3 how fervent Chinese road construction on the Tibetan Plateau in the name of the Great Western Development Scheme, and the extension of some of these roads across the border into Nepal, have spurred a drastic re-orientation of the Himalayan valleys toward Tibet and the PRC. With goods, and increasingly also food, being imported from China rather than flown into the mountains from Nepal's lowland centres, seasonal *entrepôts* near the border emerge as zones of engagement and intensive neighbouring. But despite the obvious boom (and the occasional

bust), the roads to China are not just the harbingers of modernity that put an end to the last enclaves of Himalayan tradition, as it is often purported. Rather than leading to modernity, Saxer argues, local communities see the roads as much as ways back to the long tradition of trans-Himalayan trade associated with memories of prosperity.

The three chapters in this first section provide snapshots that show the facets of the contemporary dynamics of neighbouring China along its borders. The contributions weave together several threads. In all three cases, spectacular asymmetries have recently resurfaced, leading to raising stakes in the art of neighbouring. Against the background of the omnipresent rhetoric of rapid development, fervent economic activity with a certain boom-and-bust quality has come to shape the borderworlds. Mimetic strategies and 'cosmological bluster' stand for the politics of appearances in this context.

The second section of the book looks into transnational neighbouring relations that are less directly tied to the spectacles of spatial proximity near an international borderline. Proximity, as argued above, is a matter of managing intimacy and physical as well as symbolic distance. Borderworlds as zones of engagement may reach beyond the immediate borderline. Based on the observation that neighbouring is not necessarily tied to a sedentary setting, neighbouring is practiced as a strategy of orientation and situated intimacy. It also entails the entanglements of fixities and mobilities. Neighbouring – enabled by 'jumping scales' (van Schendel 2002) – connects across regions and ties geopolitics to the very local and material. The chapters in this section provide three different perspectives on these aspects of neighbouring.

Henryk Alff (Chapter 4) discusses the dynamic reconfiguration of social relations in the context of trade between China and Central Asia. What started in the early 1990s with local shuttle traders has since reached an entirely different scale. The vast bazaar complexes of Bishkek and Almaty function as hubs for the import of Chinese goods and their distribution throughout the former Soviet Union. As transportation became more and more professionalized and wholesale businesses replaced shuttle traders, the zones of engagement moved away from the actual borderline to the back offices of the bigger players. Neighbouring relations are now managed over distance. However, the recently established Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan's anticipated entry, fundamentally change the situation again. Local shuttle trade between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, for example, has regained a certain importance as it allows traders to circumvent the new customs rules for wholesale imports. Alff's

chapter shows the elasticity of neighbouring relations and the multiple scales on which it operates.

Uradyn Bulag's analysis (Chapter 5) of Mongolia's 'Third Neighbour' diplomacy adds another twist to neighbouring as a multi-scalar endeavour of negotiating distance and proximity. Endowed with world-class coal, copper and uranium deposits, in which both of its two mighty neighbours – China and Russia – have a strong interest, Mongolia chose to seek support among potential 'third neighbours', particularly the USA and Japan. To become a neighbour, Bulag argues, means to be oriented to someone's 'fortune sovereignty', thereby becoming a force to be reckoned with. As a small state, Mongolia is strategically employing 'smart power'; it is willing to share its 'fortune sovereignty' with its neighbours near and far as a means of managing proximity and distance. The ceremony of presenting precious gift horses to foreign dignitaries thereby plays an important symbolic role. However, not all neighbours seem to understand the symbolic ties between the fine horses (meant to roam freely in the vast steppes rather then being taken home) and the territorial logic of mining tenders.

Mobility and fixity are also the topic of Tina Harris' reflections (Chapter 6) on the mobile and the material. Neighbouring, Harris argues, is mediated through pathways and their disruptions. Harris examines the construction and use of borders and roads between China and India. She reexamines the meanings of tension that arise between those who set the borders and those who move the borders, those who map the paths and those who create alternative routes. Just as active neighbouring is a matter of managing distance, managing distance is a matter of dealing with mobilities and fixities.

The final section of the volume investigates neighbouring as social relations of 'agonistic intensities'. In Chapter 7, Chris Vasantkumar traces the stories of Tibetan refugees from Amdo in north-eastern Tibet who returned to China and started doing businesses. As new arrivals they were regarded as overly sinicized and outsiders in exile; back in Tibet they are watched with much scrutiny. Moving from one neighbouring situation to the next, they remain somehow always in-between. They are 'odd' in the sense that one cannot hold them concurrently in view with either 'proper exiles' (seeking refuge rather than fortune) or their Han Chinese neighbours in Gansu and Qinghai.

Leaving one contentious neighbouring situation behind for another is also what characterizes the cases of Burmese Muslims in China that Renaud Egreteau presents (Chapter 8). Seeking both refuge and fortune across the border in Yunnan, which is considered a safer environment

than authoritarian and Buddhist-dominated Myanmar, Burmese Muslims establish new livelihoods in the jade industry of the bustling Yunnanese border towns. Here, they manage to make use of their social networks in Myanmar while at the same time find entry into the Hui Muslim society in Yunnan. In this sense, they move from being inessential neighbours in their Burmese homeland to being essential neighbours in the context of cross-border trade in precious stones. Agonistic interplays rather than open antagonism characterize the situation.

Agon – or contest – is also at the heart of Juan Zhang's analysis (Chapter 9) of the tensions during a high-level bilateral trade fair at the Sino-Vietnamese border. As the Vietnamese imposed extra duty on Chinese goods unexpectedly at the fair, Chinese traders at the border experienced the fragility of bilateral trade relations, and the uncertainty of cross-border interactions. Such tensions and the anxiety it triggers, Zhang argues, are always the undercurrent of neighbouring relations. Neighbouring in anxiety speaks to the agonistic intimacy that can be both unsettling and productive. Uncertainty triggers anxiety, and anxiety becomes the disavowed foundation of precarious trust and performative friendship between neighbours.

In Chapter 10 of the book, Magnus Fiskesjö steps away from an anthropocentric framing of neighbouring relations. Fiskesjö takes the notion of neighbouring to explore human-animal relations and deeply rooted sinocentric hierarchies. He argues that, in a certain sense, animal neighbours are seen as an extension of the barbarian periphery, a link in a hierarchical chain-of-being-like conception of the world. But this clearly antagonistic dispositive (the history of a thousand-year war, as Fiskesjö puts it) has become complicated by China's nascent animal rights movement, which emphasizes universal moralities in the fight against enslavement and the selfish extermination of human's animal neighbours.

The unifying themes in the four chapters in this final section are the spectres of unsettled relations and uncertain outcomes. Agonistic relations suggest that in order to achieve common interest, potential antagonisms between neighbours are always held in check, and friendships have to be consciously maintained and performed. Agonistic intimacies at China's borderworlds reconfigure contemporary relation politics, as communities and polities move towards a future of promises and uncertainties.

While this book does not attempt to formulate a general theory of neighbouring, it is a first step in laying the ground for an anthropology of neighbouring. The focus of this book – the shared experiences of neighbouring along and across China's borders, proximity as a matter of orientation and intimacy, and agonistic intimacy that fosters fragile futures – helps

envision the possible contours of such an anthropology. Furthermore, we hope that the ten reflections of neighbouring situations in the borderworlds at China's edge render visible a geographical configuration of great geopolitical importance. The borderworlds at stake, which sporadically make headlines as spaces of disorder but usually remain buried under the 'neat graphics of national order', as Ludden puts it (2003: 1058), reveal their positionality only in comparison. We hope that this book as a whole will contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics that transform both the very local scale of neighbouring as well as Asia as a whole.

# 7 Odd Neighbours

## Trans-Himalayan Tibetan Itineraries and Chinese Economic Development

*Chris Vasantkumar*

### Introduction: To Exile and Back

In 1959, the fourteenth Dalai Lama and much of the old Tibetan religious and cultural elite fled into exile in India. In the intervening years Tibetans on both sides of the Himalayas have not stayed put but have instead travelled frequently back and forth across the range's high passes. These journeys have been manifold, ranging from taking refuge in the exile communities of north India, to temporary trans-Himalayan sojourns on Chinese passports to visit relatives living abroad and arduous and illicit round trips embarked upon for the purposes of religious or linguistic instruction. In the West, discussions of these movements have focused almost exclusively on the figure of the refugee. And, certainly, the first wave of Tibetan migration south across the ranges was composed largely of refugees from central Tibet. Since the 1980s, however, a second set of migrants, mostly from the regions of Kham and Amdo in what was historically eastern Tibet, has undertaken the difficult journey across the mountains to the subcontinent.

Prior to 2008 when Tibetan unrest across China prompted a crackdown on trans-border flows, several thousand migrants a year or more travelled to (and, in many cases, from) Dharamsala and other Tibetan refugee centres in northern and southern India. SaveTibet.org notes in their annual reports on the 'conditions impacting the flight of Tibetan refugees'[1] that following the 2008 protests and ramped up border patrols, the number of Tibetans who made it across the border to Nepal (and in many cases beyond to India) dropped from an average of 2,500-3,000 in preceding years to a much lower range of 650-850 per annum thereafter.[2] While many of these migrants were inspired by (or sent by parents[3] who were inspired by) the prospect

1 See http://www.savetibet.org/documents/reports/refugee-report-dangerous-crossing-2011.

2 As of 2016, these trans-border flows have been halted almost completely by heightened Chinese patrols and cooperation between PRC and Nepalese authorities.

3 That a sizeable percentage of pre-2008 migrants were juveniles can be explained by the fact that refugees who arrive in Dharamsala under the ages of 18 can gain access to free or extremely low cost education at the Tibetan Children's Villages in the surrounding area. Most of my migrant

of religious freedom and unfettered access to traditional Tibetan culture, many others maintained a more pragmatic attitude toward the physically taxing, dangerous and often costly journey to the subcontinent.[4]

Such peregrinations have had manifold effects. The ambivalent reception of the 'new arrivals' (or *sar jorpa*) of 'sinicized' Tibetans fresh off the path, as it were, from Tibet itself have complicated notions of national belonging in the exile community (Diehl 2002, Falcone and Wangchuk 2008, on broader circuits of Tibetan travel see Hess 2009, Yeh 2007). Many 'new arrivals' have returned[5] to China,[6] bringing with them both a critical consciousness of the blandishments of Chinese nationalism and English-language skills

informants had gone to India at a slightly older age and were thus unable to access educational facilities of quite as high a standard, but did receive instruction in English and other subjects at Tibetan Transit Schools.

4 One example: In 2007, Jashi was a 24 year old recently returned from India working as a guide for foreign tour groups. In some respects he is happy to be back home – obviously being close to family is a good thing, and he is resigned to making the best of being in China in general, but he misses his 'school' and his friends in India. He had decided to go of his own accord at the age of fifteen. At that time he said (in a mixture of English and Chinese), he was feeling 'very hard, very excited (*jidong* 激动)' and had met many folks who had been there and had told him how great it was there: everything is free and you can learn English. So he made his way to Lhasa and stayed there for a month arranging the travel permit to Dram. From Dram he and his small party made their way painstakingly across the border, taking five days to reach Taptopani. His fellow travelers were limited to the guide who commanded the princely sum of RMB2,500 (over US$600) and a middle-aged couple whose children were living on the subcontinent. The woman had stomach problems and sometimes couldn't walk and the man was almost blind. During the day the going was okay, but at night things got difficult. Jashi recalls leading the man by the hand across narrow log bridges. Once he got to India, he was only able to communicate with family by phone and email but he really enjoyed the freedom to experience new things and the camaraderie with fellow students at his school. His friends came from various places, Amdo, Lhasa and Kham. He had many good Kham friends, not all of whom he was able to maintain contact with because it seems he left suddenly (not knowing when ahead of time) and didn't think about getting contact info ahead of time. Now he has fellow returnee friends who say they don't miss India. He thinks they are crazy.

5 For example, in the 23-person cohort that entered the Tibetan Transit School in the late 1990s with Yeshe, a monk from a farming village near Zhuoni, only two had stayed behind a decade later.

6 In their returns we can see an ironic convergence of the rhetoric of the Tibetan Government in Exile and of China. Since the 1990s, the Dalai Lama has suggested that all new migrants who would not be endangered (as a result of a history of anti-Chinese activism) by returning to China should do so (see Garratt 1997). At the same time, the PRC for many years prior to the events of 2008 (and still to some degree formally at least thereafter) has encouraged 'Overseas Tibetan Compatriots' (*Guowai Zangzu Tongbao* 国外藏族同胞) to join their returned brethren (*Huiguo Zangzu Tongbao* 回国藏族同胞) to join the big trans-national family of Chinese patriots (see Barabantseva 2012, Vasantkumar 2012). As Basang, deputy secretary of the Tibet Regional Committee of the Communist Party of China explained in a 2002 interview in the People's Daily,

that enabled them to succeed in the rapidly developing tourism sector back 'home'.[7] Even in the years of reduced trans-border mobility that have followed in the wake of the turmoil of 3/14, Tibetans on both sides of the Himalayas are acutely aware of how their co-ethnics elsewhere live. Ideas of Tibetan nation, culture and community have come to straddle the Himalayas rather than (or in addition to) be(ing) divided by them.

This chapter deals with a subset of related issues that arose during my first extended period of fieldwork in Xiahe/Labrang – in what is now Gansu Province in China's northwest – from the summer of 2003 until the spring of 2004, that I also pursued in the course of additional field research in Xiahe in 2006, 2007 and 2009 and in Dharamsala in 2006 and 2007. I had initially come to northwest China to study the relationship between everyday interactions between members of different *minzu* or ethnic groups in a national framework, specifically between Han, Hui and Tibetans and official PRC projects of multi-ethnic national unity, but as I stayed on in Labrang through a typically frigid winter, I found myself becoming increasingly interested in a particular problem of Tibetanness with both national and trans-national characteristics.

From early on in my fieldwork, I had many interactions with 'locals' from the town itself, from outlying regions of the autonomous prefecture in which Xiahe/Labrang is located and from remoter parts of Amdo who had spent time in the exile communities of the Indian subcontinent. The duration of their visits ranged from a few months to upwards of five, seven, or even ten years. Some detested India from the moment they arrived, others still reminisced fondly about pizza and sang tunes from Bollywood musicals,[8] but all had for various reasons chosen to return to Amdo. Some had returned furtively with a critical consciousness of the limits of Chinese nationalism.

China's policy is 'All patriots belong to one big family, no matter when they join the family' (People's Daily 2002).

7 Access to such employment opportunities was never guaranteed, especially inside the Tibetan Autonomous Region. There, employment as a tour guide was often contingent on passing a test in written Chinese. The earlier a Tibetan returnee had left for India, the less likely he or she would be able to pass such a test (Martin Saxer, personal communication).

8 Early in my dissertation research in the late summer of 2003, a returnee monk invited me on a picnic with a dozen or so students he was informally teaching English. As we reclined in post-prandial comfort in a mountain meadow high above Labrang Monastery, he invited each of us to sing favorite songs for the group. When others reacted with shyness, he plunged right in. It took me a second (and a double take) to realize that he had broken into a tuneful rendition of the Bollywood classic *'Kuch kuch hota hai'*. Later he introduced me to another returnee, also a monk, whose first question to me was 'Do you know pizza? I like pizza'. It turned out that he had worked in a pizza parlour for several years during his time in Dharamsala.

Others found that their time in India with the religious and cultural elite of old Tibet had instilled not a greater reverence for traditional culture but, perhaps surprisingly, a high modernist and rather acerbic anti-clericalism. Still others had returned with official blessing to cash in on the promise of economic development.

Initially, I attempted to analyze their travels within a received framework that sought to understand Tibetan exile and refuge taking in purely Tibetan terms. Only later did I realize that this problem of Tibetanness was also a problem of Chineseness – that it was in fact inseparable from the changing political and economic circumstances of life in China. I realized in other words, that scholars needed a means of analyzing both the interrelationships between Tibetan itineraries and 'Chinese' economic development and the reasons behind the invisibility of these interconnections.

## 'Oddness' and Other Predicaments of Neighbouring

To this end, in this chapter I employ the notion of 'oddness' as discussed by John Hartigan, Jr. in his work on Whiteness in the US to argue for the necessity of reframing scholarly approaches to contemporary Tibetan trans-Himalayan mobilities. Hartigan (2005) employs this clunky, yet, I insist, generative term in his work to highlight the importance of attending to 'disjunctive, yet clearly related' aspects of 'cultural identity'. Hartigan seeks to gain critical purchase on the class dimensions to Whiteness that are often rendered invisible by a focus on generalized White social privilege. By juxtaposing a historically minded exposition of the emergence and growth of 'White trash', first as an epithet and later as a means of self-identification with a situated analysis of 'the powers and privileges associated with whiteness' (Hartigan 2005: 1), Hartigan seeks to bring 'the social predicament of poor whites' (2005: 4) back into the picture while at the same time attending to processes of racialization and the means by which White Privilege is perpetuated.

In doing so, Hartigan suggests that these two figures, of White Privilege and White Trash are precisely 'odd' because, 'they are difficult to hold equally in view' – one is associated with 'domination and hegemony'; the other applies to a population that is 'far from dominant (Hartigan 2005: 2)'. In Hartigan's analysis of American Whites, he suggests that because 'prevailing academic discussions' assume that the pair of whiteness and blackness is 'sufficient for explaining race … the degraded status of poor whites … fall[s] from view' (Hartigan 2005: 2). The race-based story of White Privilege in this

case trumps class and poor whites are effectively erased. In this chapter, I want to apply Hartigan's analytic oddness to the returned Tibetans I met in and around Labrang as a means of highlighting the ways in which the figure of the refugee has effectively enabled the returned, or migrant Tibetan to drop from view in scholarly circles. Further, by decentring the refugee as the figure *par excellence* of migrant Tibetans in the contemporary world, I want to bring two sets of odd juxtapositions back into the picture.

First I think we can begin to reclaim from obscurity those Tibetan trans-Himalayan journeying practices that do not conform to the refugee ideal – those journeys where religion or cultural nationalism may not be primary motivating factors. Such journeys, I suggest below, have been difficult to 'hold equally in view' with journeys of taking refugee in no small part due to a politics of culture that scripts Tibetan motivations as always already separate from China (cf. Adams 1996). In such a frame, the motivations for Tibetan sojourns are seen as explicable in purely Tibetan religio-cultural (or historical) terms and are thought not to be shaped in any meaningful way by the concerns of the Chinese nation-state (at least insofar as these concerns exceed the repression of Tibetans within China's borders). In this sense, I seek to recover the stories of the odd migrants obscured by a normative focus on the figure of the refugee.

However, I also want to think about 'oddness' on a scale that transcends the stories of individuals. Here I refer to the People's Republic of China and trans-Himalayan Tibet as themselves 'odd neighbours' – tightly connected quasi-intimates whose legendary antagonism renders it almost impossible to consider other sorts of mutual interrelationships. Thus the degree that Tibetan trans-Himalayan sojourns were motivated in part by changing economic (rather than political or religious) conditions inside the PRC has stubbornly resisted analysis. This chapter is a necessarily provisional attempt to redress this oversight, by adding the dynamics of economic development in contemporary China to the landscape of multiple in-betweenesses that comprises what the editors of this volume might term the 'predicament of neighbouring' that trans-Himalayan Tibetan migrants must negotiate. A story from my fieldwork may help to make these points more concretely.

## A 'Neverland' in the Borderlands

The renovations were behind schedule and Gesar was antsy about how little headway his workers seemed to be making. A bundle of scarcely-contained

energy even when at rest, in his agitated state he now approached a superhuman level of animation. He flitted from one set of workmen to another, supervising and fetching parts as needed. One moment found him cajoling the painter daubing at the dimly traced outlines of traditional motifs on the new reception counter. The next witnessed him haranguing the two men hopping precariously on a shoulder-high plank placed between two rickety-looking step ladders whose efforts to install two lighting fixtures were being impeded by some pernickety ceiling dry wall. Only when he had begun garrulously slapping the backs of the men sweeping debris from what had been previously been slick marble floors did he see that I had entered, pulling up short and hurrying over to greet me with his characteristic and infectious enthusiasm.

A few days previous, arriving in town in the summer of 2009 for the first time in almost three years, I had been surprised and somewhat alarmed to find the lobby of Gesar's hotel gutted.[9] I was initially concerned that Gesar had been forced to sell or gone out of business as a result of the town being closed to foreign tourists for over a year after the ethnic unrest of March, 2008. At that time, Tibetans all across China had risen in protest against central authorities, and the tide of dissent had sloshed all the way from Lhasa at the centre of the TAR to this far-flung outpost on the border of Han, Hui and Tibetan spheres of cultural influence. I had gotten down from the bus and walked across the street to the steps where Gesar and I had first met seven years before, only to find his hotel a cacophonous construction site swarming with unfamiliar faces. In short order, however, his wife spotted me as I peered in through an open window frame and she ran upstairs to fetch him. He came down looking tired, covered in the dust of renovation.

A few minutes later, smoking and chatting over cantaloupe in the spacious but modestly furnished owner's quarters, he described the aftermath of the events of the previous March. The last year and half had been hell he told me, even if things had been looking up recently. Business had taken a hit from the enforced absence of Westerners, his father-in-law had died (after which he had had to perform expensive and, to his anticlerical sensibility, pointless mourning rituals) and as if this were not enough, a needed and apparently unproblematic loan application had fallen through at the last moment forcing frantic alterations to the renovation plans. He noted that he had stayed open to this point on the custom provided by Chinese domestic tourists, explaining that he could not not take these Chinese tourists in – if

9 Pseudonym for both hotel and person; given continuing instability in the region I have also chosen to change the name of the town as well.

he didn't and one complained to the authorities, he'd be out of business 'like that!'

'Well, I have to behave, don't I?!' he said only half-jokingly. 'The police call me every week and ask me, "What have you been up to?" Plus, there are good and bad people in every group: Tibetans, Han, Muslims, Americans'. Indeed, he continued, when, a few years back he had grown increasingly frustrated with the unreliability and poor work habits of the tour guides (Tibetan like himself) who he employed in his horse trekking company, he had gone into business with a new partner, a Chinese tourist from Chengdu, a motivated and diligent worker, who he later found out was actually a Hui Muslim. When other Tibetans complained: 'You are such a Tibetan man, always supporting your culture and yet your partner is a Chinese?' Gesar stood his ground: 'He's honest, he works hard and is a good guy. I've never wanted to only serve Tibetans; I'll work with all kinds of honest people'.

Later after a meal with him and his family, Gesar rose from his chair said, 'Come on, Chris, let me show you something' and led me out into the street and pointed up to an as yet unfinished portion of the second floor. This, he said, gesturing grandly, is my future restaurant; if the loan had come through when it was supposed to, he would have added a third floor done up in traditional wooden architecture. Yet, despite the economies he had had to take, construction had plunged ahead undaunted. After this view from afar, he led me up the stairs for a tour. 'Remember? This used to be my lobby', he said as we passed through the halls of the hotel (then without showers or Western style toilets) in which I had first stayed in a cold December many winters before. In the half-built restaurant, there wasn't yet much to see but Gesar had all the details mapped out it in his head. 'The chairs will be here', he proclaimed, pointing out the particular kind he had purchased in a photo album, 'the tables will be here, the kitchen here. After the tour he was quiet for a moment then pondered out loud, 'What should I call it? I think either "Black Tent" or "Neverland"'.[10]

As we stood surveying the still mostly nebulous prospect of this 'Neverland', a refurbishment and expansion planned in response to the rapid development of Tsatang as a (both domestic and foreign) tourist destination over the previous decade, I couldn't help but both ponder the theoretical 'neverland' inhabited by the economically successful returned Tibetan migrant in contemporary China and be reminded of the humbler but fortuitous circumstances of our meeting. On Christmas Day 2002, nearing the end of

10 Michael Jackson's passing had just occurred when this conversation took place. In the end, 'Black Tent' prevailed.

my first, preliminary, trip to what scholars used to call the Kansu-Tibet marches, I found myself, freezing and devoid of Western companionship, in what was then a tiny, rather isolated, and almost impossibly picturesque mountain village. Having resigned myself to spending the day watching herdsmen drive their yaks across the town's main bridge, I sat down on the concrete steps leading up to a storefront to smoke a cigarette and, finding that I had misplaced my lighter, asked the only other person sitting there – a Tibetan man with the long hair and heavy wool-lined cloak of a nomad – in Chinese for a light.

Much to my surprise, he replied to my request in perfect English ('of course') and asked me where I was from. We quickly fell into conversation and ended up spending the entire day together over several beers and numerous cigarettes. Gesar, was at first, my 'Christmas friend' as he put it. In our long, pleasant, boozy conversation that day I discovered that he had learned his English over the course of an extended stay in the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala. He had brought back from India a fierce anti-clericalism and a pragmatic approach to life in China – focusing not on political agitation but on improving educational opportunities for local Tibetans. His fluent English had allowed him to begin working as a tour guide in 1999. Within a decade, he had become the proprietor of a hotel (inherited from his father-in-law) and a successful horse trekking business (which he had built largely with his own sweat).

At the time, I didn't really know what to make of this situation. I took my Christmas friend to be a charming and unexpected aberration from what I assumed to be the usual patterns of Tibetan migration. I couldn't help wondering, 'What kind of Tibetan comes back from India?' I was intrigued but a little suspicious. Yet in retrospect, this meeting with (more than ten years on) my first friend in Tibet, seems incredibly fortuitous. Gesar's account was merely the first indication of the degree to which prior to the events of March 2008, Amdo Tibetans refused to stay put, or rather, of the degree to which Tibetan lives in what is now northwest China are lived on complex, often trans-national terrains. For, in the mid to late 2000s, Tibetans in and around Gannan Autonomous Prefecture, even those who had never ventured beyond the prefectural capital, lived their lives with a consciousness of the possibility of living those lives in important elsewheres: Lhasa, Dharamsala and the West. As such, the 'art of neighbouring' they practiced necessarily had to be responsive to the complexities of negotiating many betweenesses simultaneously.

I conceptualize neighbouring and the itineraries and subjectivities that both condition and are conditioned by it as emerging from multiple,

overlapping and often fraught relationships between proximate quasi-intimates. In such contexts, closeness in geographical or network space or apparent cultural or natural similarity is often belied by the complexity of the intermixtures of the familiar and the unknown revealed in practice. Further, if the word neighbour itself derives from a term denoting the practice or situation of dwelling nearby, in examining the Tibetan examples that follow, we can take neither dwelling (with its common associations of sedentarism, community, and stasis) nor proximity (in physical space) for granted. Instead I suggest below the necessity of treating neighbouring not as passive proximity in geographical space but as an active traversing of multiple scales and cartographies of proximity and un/familiarity at once – the physical barriers and conduits that link and divide China, Tibet and India, for example, different imaginings of China and Tibet, and even variant modes of enacting Tibetanness itself.

Gesar's example is representative enough despite its specificity. He had returned in 1999 after seven years in India only after the death of his brother and the increasingly poor health of his father prompted his family to ask him to come home. Returning as illicitly[11] as he had gone, he brought with him both the sterling English that had so surprised me and an intense suspicion of organized religion. Yet his fierce anti-clericalism had not diminished the level of official scrutiny he had received since returning. He joked, wryly, about his being subject to long-term surveillance after his return that, 'the communist party had me in their heart; I had my own bodyguard for eight years'. Instead of political agitation or religious meditation, his continuing passion since his return had been the sponsorship of quality primary and secondary education for local Tibetans that would allow them to get ahead economically in today's China. (That his schools were forced to close in the aftermath of the March 2008 protests was personally devastating).

At the time of our first meeting I still naively assumed that anyone who had braved the treacherous and illicit journey across the Himalayas to the religious and cultural freedoms of exile Tibetan communities in India and Nepal would most likely be tempted to stay on on the Sub-continent – both because of the effort expended in the process and on some level, I then

11 For many, the return journey is no less dangerous than the outward leg. Another of my first friends in Tibet, Yeshe, a monk from near Zhuoni, narrowly managed to avoid jail time when at the last minute he postponed his return trip, going to Calcutta to meet a high lama instead. The friend with whom he had planned to travel was stopped near the border soon after entering China and thrown in prison when a search of his luggage revealed a tiny but nonetheless damning copy of the Tibetan flag.

thought, because this was just what Tibetans *did*. Thus both his story and the presence of a sizeable population of returned Tibetans in Amdo both affronted my expectations about what Tibetans should want and do and posed a thorny problem to think through anthropologically. It was clear from my interactions with returned Tibetans that they occupied a particularly fraught space between the moral destinations of Chinese nationalism and orthodox projects of Tibetanness amongst Tibetans in exile. Close to but not quite isomorphic with China, India and non-migrant Tibetan populations, they found themselves confronting multiple proximate un/familiar others on borderlands that were often more imagined than geographic. Moreover, their presence unsettled the usual kinds of stories that people (Western and Tibetan, Scholars and lay folk) tell about the uncomfortable position of Tibet and its people within the contemporary PRC. In these stories there is a term for Tibetans who attempt to leave China illicitly with hopes of making it to the exile communities of north India and elsewhere – 'refugees'. And certainly many of the returned Tibetans I encountered in Amdo, initially thought of their own journeys in these terms.

But becoming a refugee, taking refuge, is premised on a particular, deferred relationship to the notion or promise of an eventual return. The arc of a refugee's journey is tied to wider geo-political circumstances. A return is promised, but it is deferred until the conflict or calamity that has resulted in the refugee's displacement, their up-rooting, has been resolved. Until such a resolution occurs or is made to occur, taking refuge is a waiting game fraught with uncertainties and the journey of the refugee is a one-way ticket. I don't wish to downplay or denigrate the travails, hopes or extremities of duress that Tibetans who would or do label themselves as refugees have experienced. Instead I want to suggest the at least provisional necessity of stepping back from a perspective where the figure of the refugee colours all knowledge production about the trans-Himalayan peregrinations of contemporary PRC-born Tibetans.[12] In a post 3/14 world in which the 'Tibet Question' remains simmeringly unsettled, what do we make of the refugee who goes back (Long and Oxfeld 2004)? How do we begin to reckon with this unexpected trajectory of Tibetan migration – *from* India (and Nepal) *to* China in a way that doesn't end up likening it to driving the wrong way down a one-way street?

12 This point should not be construed as minimizing the struggles of Tibetans who so identify, or as endorsing the lack of legal (as opposed to theoretical) refugee status that makes the lives of Tibetans living in and traveling to Nepal so fraught with danger and difficulty.

## Up*routing* the Refugee

This question is of particularly pressing importance in the Tibetan case for two reasons that have very much to do with the special status of the refugee in discussions of trans-national Tibetan culture. I will present these reasons briefly before discussing each in turn in more depth. First, in contrast to the usual state of affairs in the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1997 [1992]), in the Tibetan case the refugee is seen as normative rather than aberrant. Second, this normative status of the refugee is premised upon a hard and fast separation between Tibetan journeying practices and the recent political and economic transformations of the contemporary Chinese nation-state. Below, I critique both of these propositions arguing that while refugee subjectivities remain important to trans-national Tibetans' self-conceptions, visions of taking refuge neither completely capture Tibetan itineraries of the last few decades nor do they adequately describe contemporary Tibetan returnees' subjective assessments of their complex interstitiality-cum-neighbourliness. Refugees, in other words, are only part of the story.

Further, mistaking them for the entirety of the story has led scholars working on Tibetan mobilities to habitually ignore the degree to which such sojourns may be shaped in important ways by China's rapid economic development. The tendency has thus been to overlook the degree to which both Tibetan journeys and returns are occasioned and conditioned by agonistic intimacies of China and Tibet rather than by their separation. The emphasis of religious over economic factors in Tibetan migrations may be a mark of just how ironclad the common sense that scripts Tibetan journey as always already separate from Chinese development has become. Indeed, it took me several years after my return from the field to make the connection between the two.

I did so by realizing the fallacy of two common assumptions. The first of these is that Tibetans always travel for Tibetan reasons which are always already not Chinese. This claim is belied by the intimacy of the links between the multi-ethnic Chinese nation-state (and its discontents) and both Chinese and Tibetan transnationalism (cf. Tuttle 2007, Vasantkumar 2012). The second specious assumption takes the form of the analogy China is to economy as Tibet is to religion. While this may once have been true at a very general level, it has not held water for at least the decade plus that has elapsed since the beginning of the Great Western Development Scheme (under the auspices of which Tibetan religion itself became a key attraction for the tourist dollars needed to catalyse regional development). Ultimately, I have concluded that despite the over-determined politics of culture that

alternately script Tibetan as separate from both Westerner and Chinese (Adams 1996) or try to reconstruct Tibetan returns to China as 'Chinese' sojourns (Vasantkumar 2012), in practice, Tibetan motivations for migration are as likely to be as much economic as religious.

It should be noted that this mutual implication of 'economic' and 'religious' factors differs not so much from traditional practices of pilgrimage which could incorporate both as it does from received Western wisdom about the spiritual purity of traditional Tibetan culture (and by extension of the journeys undertaken under its auspices). Further, in some sense, despite the fact that Tibetans' trans-Himalayan peregrinations run counter to the usual itineraries of Chinese development (from the country to the city, from the western hinterlands to the wealthy urban centres of the eastern seaboard),[13] it is hard to avoid the creeping sense that any analysis of such itineraries that does not link them to China's rapid economic development is incomplete. Let us attempt to redress, at least provisionally, this incompleteness.

Drawing on the work of scholars such as James Clifford (1988, 1997) and Liisa Malkki (1997 [1992]), anthropologists, critical human geographers and practitioners of other allied disciplines have, in recent years, paid increasing attention to the ways in which national belonging is given shape not only by deeply rooted notions of autochthony or primordial identity, but also by particular *routes* of patterned movement that both tie the component parts of nation-states together into provisionally coherent wholes but also, commonly, exceed or cross-cut the cartographic boundaries of the nation-states in question. This shift in emphasis has taken place in concert with the growth of anthropological inquiries that actively question teleological narratives of the nation-state, inquiries that supplement attention to the eternal verities of nationalist discourse with an attention to the contingent, ongoing production of senses of belonging on both national and transnational scales. By looking at the patterns of movement that performatively constitute people's subjective apprehensions of being 'native to the nation', anthropologists have been able to cast some critical light on the predominantly 'sedentarist metaphysics' (Malkki 1997 [1992]) through which national forms are usually imagined and, further, have illuminated

13 Although several informants mentioned in 2007 that many more local Tibetans were migrating to Beijing (thanks to ease of employment in the run up to the Olympics) than heading to India, my research has led me to believe that such travels are either not very common (only one of my informants had a close friend studying or working in Beijing) or not commonly discussed. By contrast I ran into many Tibetans who had been to India, knew friends or relatives who had been, or wanted to go and talked about such aspirations or experiences freely.

the trans-national structures of belonging and community with which national projects are complexly bound up. Routes have been placed along roots in scholarly attempts to understand belonging in the 'national order of things' (see Vasantkumar 2013 for a more detailed discussion of related themes).

Malkki has famously described the 'sedentarist' and 'arborescent' metaphors of culture that characterize this national order and that lead in many cases to displacement as being cast as aberrant – as an uprooting, the consequences of which have historically included the marginalization of refugees and other mobile populations that exist in the national order's interstices. Yet while Malkki's interventions are justly famous for providing trenchant ethnographic illustration of Anderson (1991) and Clifford's (1988) placing mobility at the heart of (more-than-)national belonging, the Tibetan case highlights the limits of her claim that the refugee is necessarily a marginal figure. Quite to the contrary, Moran (2004) acutely notes that in the Tibetan context, rather than being a stigmatized, deracinated or uprooted Other to an authentic, territorially grounded envisioning of nation or culture, the refugee is, instead, central to contemporary articulations of authentic Tibetan culture. According to many of trans-national Tibet's strongest supporters, both Tibetan and Western alike, 'Tibetan culture and Tibetan Buddhism now function fully and perfectly only in Diaspora' (Moran 2004: 188).

In this instance, therefore, it is the rooted (or more precisely for returnees, the rerooted) that is aberrant, the uprooted normative. Moran explains

> The rather different semiotic valence of the 'Tibetan refugee'. It is as if, by the magic inherent in this particular geographic qualifier, the categorization of refugee is stood on its head. The Tibetan refugee does come to stand for his or her nation in absentia, carrying the culture as legacy and as precious cargo. Further, within the world of popular media representations (as well as many Tibetans' own estimations), this cargo is in fact their gift to the world. Tibetans are not usually portrayed as 'rootless' or as stripped of the aura that surrounds their nation-culture; in fact, quite the reverse. (Moran 2004: 189)

If Tibetan refugees reverse (or benefit from a reversal of) the usual terms of the national order of things (even if this symbolic valorisation is of very little assistance in traversing the fraught terrains of national borders and geopolitical struggle), it follows that they also reverse the dialectic of visibility and invisibility that Malkki links to this order. Whereas in Malkki's

account, 'refugees are rendered 'systematically invisible' (Moran 2004: 189), in the Tibetan case of which I write, it is mobile non-refugee Tibetans that are rendered invisible (non-mobile Tibetans in China are arguably rendered inauthentic rather than invisible, but this is a topic for another paper). Aberrance here is figured not in terms of the uprooting of sedentary authenticities but as the up*routing* (if you will) of authentic itineraries wherein returning is tantamount to selling out.

## Pilgrims of Development

Let me be clear that I am not suggesting that Tibetans who (return) migrate trans-nationally in search not only of refuge but also of fortune – Tibetans, in other words, who become pilgrims of development – are necessarily co-opted by or complicit in Chinese national projects. While most necessarily swear off explicit political expression, most also have no illusions about the contradictions, injustices and inequalities of everyday life in China. Indeed, some, like Gesar, seek to lay the foundation for a future Tibet of their own imagining that diverges from both China and exile Tibetan ideals. In place of the over-determined binaries of the Tibet Question as phrased by both interested parties (whether cast in terms of the struggle on the part of virtuous communists to free Tibetan serfs from their evil monastic overlords or as a confrontation between the peaceful partisans of Buddhist enlightenment and the destructive, rapacious Chinese nation-state) the situation on the ground is complexly polyvalent (cf. Powers 2004). What should we then make of Tibetan modernists who return to China to work as guides for foreign tourists, showing them the remains of traditional Tibetan culture even as they themselves seek modernity on Tibetan terms and critically assess the essentialist claims of both Chinese and Tibetan nationalisms? 'Refugee' will not suffice to describe such travellers.

Those who stay, those who go and those who return all do so for a variety of reasons. This should not be surprising, but, perhaps, it still is. It also shouldn't be scandalous to admit that for at least some of the Tibetans involved that economics may trump (or exist alongside) religion or politics, that for some at least, travel to India is undertaken at least in part for instrumental reasons – to parlay English language ability into superior economic prospects (and perhaps laterally support for Tibetan education, culture or language) in China. As the iron rice bowl of China under socialism has given way to the new post-WTO world of risk and self-reliance, Amdo Tibetans, in addition to perceiving themselves as cultural and religious

minorities (who prior to 2008 were able to access rather more freedom on those counts than Tibetans in the TAR; times have since rather radically changed), also internalized, to some degree, ideas of economic and cultural backwardness common to those hailing from underdeveloped rural regions in China's western hinterland (cf. Vasantkumar 2014).

As the Chinese central government has, at least formally, turned its attention to the development of the Western Regions (starting in particular in 2000), local governments have been given some control over assessing how best to employ locally specific resources to foster economic development (under the auspices for example of the maxim 'develop locally specific economy [i.e. resources]', *fazhan tese jingji* 发展特色经济). Prior to 2008, tourism was, alongside such industries as forestry and mineral extraction, perhaps the idiom par excellence for this locally specific development. Places like Lhasa in the TAR, Lijiang in Yunnan, Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan and ever more widely scattered locales like Xiahe, Tsatang, Langmusi, Repgong, Ganzi, Dege, and Yushu all began to figure with some prominence on the itineraries of Western tourists (and since 2008, with as yet unclear consequences, in the journeys of a new breed of Chinese backpackers (see Lim 2009, Shepherd 2009, Vasantkumar 2009). In this era of expanding western tourism, Tibetans with English language proficiency were ideally positioned to serve as guides.[14]

This positioning was in no small part due to the confluence between their ethnicity (Tibetans are generally seen by Westerners as more authentic and less politically compromised guides to Tibetan Buddhist monuments than Han Chinese) and their linguistic aptitude (most Western tourists speak only European languages). Given the generally lousy state of English language instruction in Western China in the late 2000s, access to English in India was, for many migrants (both potential and returned) one of the most appealing aspects of the entire endeavour. This is not to say that these economic motives always trumped or replaced more purely nationalist or religious motives, often all three were present in different measure. (Even the most strongly anti-clerical migrants I met, two young Tibetan men who separately praised the Cultural Revolution, only wishing that the Tibetans

14 Further, most if not all of the Tibetans I talked to in Dharamsala had friends or knew of others who had returned to China and achieved at a modicum of economic success. In 2007, one Tibetan in Dharamsala told me that outside of Lhasa where supervision of returnees is usually strict and occasionally draconian as when in 2004 many returnees were booted from their jobs in tourism-related industries for the crime of having visited India, he knew of many people who had gone back and were doing alright working as guides, English teachers or entrepreneurs.

had been able to control it in their own territory, still expressed reverence for the Dalai Lama and Buddhism in general).

Certainly, the journey itself to and from India was and remains extraordinarily dangerous. Just as certainly some Tibetans would no doubt undertake such travels even if there were no access to free education in the exile communities. Yet, I still believe that a portrait of Tibetan migrants that casts them firmly and solely in refugee mode is less a description of the actual itineraries on the ground than a reproduction of a particular spatialized cultural politics of difference in which Tibetan is scripted as always already separate from Chinese.[15] Whether or not economic motivations for such movements are essential or incidental, it would be advisable, I suggest, to consider contemporary Tibetan trans-Himalayan migrations as proceeding from a complex amalgam of economic, cultural, religious and political motivations. In such an amalgamation, the economic advantages *in China* provided by English language education in Tibetan exile communities abroad should not be overlooked. Whether, in order to add nuance to our understandings of trans-Himalayan Tibetan migration, we should alternately abandon, decentre, or employ the category of refugee as strategic essentialism will thus no doubt occasion significant debate.

## Odd Migrants

I suggest that in order to start to make sense of the figure of the returned Tibetan we need to begin by broadening our analytic terminology. In place of the term 'refugees' and its over-determining connotations, which are apropos to many but not all Tibetan populations and in place of the descriptive, but strangely flat 'returnees', I propose the term 'odd migrants'. As discussed at the beginning of this essay, I am using the word 'odd' in a somewhat technical sense that, following Hartigan, is meant to highlight both the singularity of and the significant internal cleavages within the population I attempt to describe. For, the category of Tibetan returnees is riven by differences of class, region and language that parallel the

15 Which, it should be noted, exists uncomfortably alongside other mappings (such as the common equation by long-term Tibetan residents of Dharamsala of new arrivals with the cultural and moral orientation of the Chinese nation-state. The bitter irony to find having sacrificed so much to leave China that one is tarred with accusations of complicity with the PRC upon arrival in India, might be another example of the normalization of the figure of the refugee (here equated only with those who left China in 1959 or shortly after) in an exile Tibetan context.

significant discontinuities Hartigan highlights that make it so difficult to think different sorts of American Whiteness together. Two groups of returnees are particularly 'odd' in this sense.

These two groups can be effectively distinguished by their reasons for returning, their welcome (or lack thereof) upon return and by the sorts of conceptual limits these reasons and receptions render manifest. The first of these two odd groups is a population of young PRC-born Amdowas, both ecclesiastical and lay, most often, but not exclusively male who venture to India for religious or practical instruction (e.g., learning English) motivated by a general sense of dissatisfaction with life in China's Tibet(s) that derives only partially from some sort of ethno-national or religious sense of marginalization. These migrants have travelled both to and from India in some less-than-licit manner, sneaking across snowy passes 'like thieves in the night' as one of my friends put it, toughing it out in Ngari or dodging border posts down in the misty valleys near Dram. This sort of migrant is no longer feted upon his or her return, but instead goes to a local police station, turns themself in and, depending on their degree of *guanxi* and the corruptness of the police, pays a fine of varying severity and slips back into the general stream of social life (with perhaps, as in Gesar's case, a bodyguard in tow).

The return of even average Tibetans used to occasion considerably more positive official attention than it does today. My friends in Labrang told me that the local government used to hold galas to welcome back *guiguo zangzu tongbao* 归国藏族同胞or 'Returned Tibetan Compatriots' and I have seen pictures in friends' apartments of gatherings of smiling returnees posing beneath red banners with this phrase picked out in gold characters. For the most part, however, Tibetan returnees have grown so common place[16] that the government has become perhaps just a little *blasé* about them. Or perhaps it has to do with changing definitions of *guiguo* (归国). *Gui* (归), has the connotations of returning home having made good for oneself while away – it in this sense describes a return that casts both the returner and the place of return in a positive light. Where once even the return of farm boys or long haired nomads was viewed in this light, in the years immediately preceding 2008, it seemed that to occasion the kinds of feting now prevalent in the development-minded PRC, as with so many other things in contemporary China, one, as it were, has to pay to play. This is where the second group of odd migrants comes in.

16 By 1998, China had 'welcomed' the visits of 22,935 Tibetans visiting relatives and more than 2200 returning from abroad to settle down (China Tibet Information Center 2007).

Here I refer to a smaller and generally more affluent substrate of the Tibetan population who have the means and material resources at their command to be feted as 'foreign investors' or who have the life story to allow them to be deployed for propagandistic purposes as the heroes (or more rarely heroines) of idealized success stories, as having achieved what might, for lack of a better phrase, be termed 'China's Tibetan Dream'.[17] In the years prior to the troubles of 2008, five such idealized biographies of returnees could be easily located on the website for the China Tibet Information Center.[18]

These accounts served as exemplifications of opportunity and self-improvement. These five vignettes which all feature a truly baffling system for romanizing Chinese versions of Tibetan names were entitled 'Yixi Dainbgyai Takes the Lead in Becoming Rich', 'Dainzeng Wangdu, an Exemplary Village Head', 'Goisam Paintog – A Famous Tibetan Doctor', 'Zhaxi Wangdu, a Deputy to the Lhasa Municipal People's Congress' and 'Gyaincain Qoinpe – Member of the Lhasa Municipal Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference'. All the individuals in question hail from central Tibet and are members of the generation of Tibetans who fled the TAR in the 1950s; they are, in other words, as the purple prose of the website puts it, 'approaching the evenings of their lives'. All returned to Tibet between 1982 and 1987.

While sharing certain formulaic aspects, flight into exile, disillusionment, tearful returns, described in purplest prose – Dainzeng Wangdu for example is said to remark, 'After my return to the motherland it was as if I were a parched seed [sic] which had suddenly been drenched with sweet dew', and concluding homilies on the virtues of the party – these vignettes highlight the different modes in which returnees can make good. Yeshe Dhonjub (at least I think that's how one might render Yixi Dainbgyai) by virtue of his own considerable talents and preferential government investment and taxation policies is able to parlay his small timber concern into a diversified business empire in Tsethang. Tenzin Wangdu illustrates how Tibetans in China can gain control over their own affairs by assuming positions of power in local government. Kelsang Phuntsok demonstrates that traditional arts such as Tibetan medicine are not only allowed to flourish in today's open-minded China but can become in themselves sources of

17 Given the avidity with which 'China' is inserted into Tibet-related titles (e.g., 'Tin Tin in China's Tibet' and 'China's Tibetan Mastiff' just to name two).

18 http://www.tibetinfor.com/en/reports/ordinary/returned/ret_menu.htm (website deactivated).

wealth and social esteem. Finally, Jashi Wangdu and Tenzin Jigme show that Tibetans even have access to higher levels of Chinese government: 'as spokespersons for the people, they actively participate in the administration and discussion of state affairs'.

## Conclusion: Odd Neighbours

I think we should take these vignettes neither as representing the actual experiences of actual individuals nor as completely fictitious, but rather as something akin to, say, a movie 'based' on a book by the same name – actualities embellished and repurposed for particular ends – here the United Front attempt to hail overseas Tibetans as one of the key constituencies of the Chinese nation-state. That is to say simply because these accounts stretch credibility or bear the all-too-telltale marks of formalism or because Goisam Paintog crops up at least once as the protagonist of what is supposed to be Dainzeng Wangdu's story, that does not mean we should conclude that the phenomenon of wealthy and successful Tibetan returnees does not exist, or the interests of such returnees do not sometimes coincide with official envisionings. Just as the strange romanizations distance us but allow us to perceive dimly actual Tibetan names, these formalized accounts similarly allow us distanced, filtered access to actual Tibetan lives even as the medium itself makes it impossible to overlook their repurposing.

Further, even though these exemplary biographies of returned Tibetans made good don't fully coincide with the details of their lives, they can be seen as a significant manifestation of government policy towards potential trans/national co-uterines. They seek to emphasize a co-nascence that highlights Tibetan compatriots' place in the Chinese national-family. These and other returned Tibetans made good may or may not be foreign born but have found themselves sucked (or have manoeuvred themselves) into the vortex of new forms of nationally-inflected trans-national structures of feeling which the PRC seeks to mobilize. Further projects of economic and 'social' development in what are commonly perceived to be backward minority regions hail the so-called 'Overseas Tibetans Compatriots' as 'a potential subset of *Huaqiao* (华侨) or 'Overseas Chinese' and an underutilized source of the 'foreign investment' central to plans for (for example) developing the West (see Vasantkumar 2012, for a more detailed treatment of one of these 'Overseas Tibetans').

Yet despite the important differences between these celebrated and fictionalized Tibetan returnees and the invisible, illicit ones with whom

we began this chapter, it is worth reflecting on one further valence of neighbouring as I have tried to employ it in this chapter – the fact that the boundaries between the two may not be absolute. The motivations of the wealthy investors may be as much religious as economic, the poorer returnees may have initially travelled in hopes of improving their economic status in China. (Indeed the boundary between the economic and the religious often breaks down on closer inspection). The experience of trans-national, trans-Himalayan migration even in its most illicit form can, as Gesar's experiences so boldly illustrate, itself be productive of class mobility. Such complexities highlight the degree to which economically and religiously motivated Tibetans are in Hartigan's terms, precisely odd, given that they are so hard to hold together conceptually. What this oddness in turn suggests, I argue, less as a conclusion than as a jumping off point for further study is that in place of, or at the very least in addition to understandings of these Amdowas' trans-Himalayan peregrinations as a sort of spatialized *Cri-de-Coeur*, stemming from a monolithic Chinese anti-Tibetanness, we as scholars must seek to treat them as more complex phenomena that both bind together and produce economic, political and moral terrains in novel and unpredictable combinations. Moreover, in this reimagining, Tibetan mobilities and Chinese economic development are themselves revealed as odd neighbours.

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