Border Corridors: Mobility, Containment, and Infrastructures of Development Between Nepal and China

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BORDER CORRIDORS:
Mobility, Containment, and Infrastructures of Development between Nepal and China

by

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B.A., Middlebury College, 2000
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A thesis submitted to
The Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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This thesis entitled:
Border Corridors: Mobility, Containment, and Infrastructures of Development between Nepal and China
written by Galen Murton
has been approved for the Department of Geography

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John O’Loughlin

Date ________________

A final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline

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Border Corridors: Mobility, Containment, and Infrastructures of Development between Nepal and China
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ABSTRACT
This dissertation examines infrastructure development between Nepal and China to argue that infrastructure is a symbol of national development imaginaries, a process and practice of state making, and a vector for the spatial operations of geopolitical power. Starting with the construction of a small trans-border road in Nepal’s northern district of Mustang, I examine how a local infrastructure project has evolved into and been incorporated within larger, international transportation networks, border regimes, trade and tax policies, and humanitarian programs. In making this analysis, I introduce the concept of border corridors to examine how highways, fences, bureaucracies, and aid are interwoven infrastructural components that build upon one another in scalar and fractal ways in the production of larger infrastructure systems. Utilizing the dialectical lenses of mobility and containment to see how infrastructure development in Mustang constitutes new forms of border corridors, I argue that shifting configurations of trade networks and sovereign rule have (re)shaped social relations across the region that are in turn expressed through unique but oscillating geographical imaginaries. As fractal constructions and relational processes that augment, redirect, and replace one another, I also show that infrastructures are not things with definitive edges, beginnings, or endings but, rather, interdependent pieces of broader and more complex material configurations. In order to see the state by looking at the borderlands, I also examine infrastructures as material processes that undergird state formation and illustrate how cultural practices and geopolitical interests converge in material and territorial ways through the production of roads, borders, commodity circulations, and humanitarian aid. Unraveling the entanglements of these infrastructural systems, I show how infrastructures intersect and refract one another across trans-Himalayan spaces and, in so doing, reconfigure relationships between states and citizens. Particularly in the context of greater Chinese interventions in South Asia and possible future trajectories of Beijing’s One Belt One Road Initiative, I argue that infrastructure development in Nepal presents a valuable case with which to understand the linkages between broad international processes of South-South development and local community level experiences with changing subject positions and social stratification.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Imagine a world without roads. A place without motor vehicles, where travel is made on foot or horseback, where time is measured by walking distances, where car accidents, urban congestion, and vehicle emissions do not yet scar the landscape. Until recently, this was a reality across the trans-Himalayan region. But in just the last ten years, international motor roads have opened between Chinese Tibet and highland regions across South Asia. Four roads now operate across the Nepal-China borderlands, and four more will come online as soon as 2020. On the one hand, *the roads are new*, and their accelerating development throughout the trans-Himalaya brings forces of modernity and globalization to places historically viewed as peripheral to state centers. These forces are socially disruptive, characterized by experiences with cash-based exchange relations, wealth polarization, public transport timetables, consumption of manufactured commodities, and the challenges of waste management. On the other hand, *the routes are old*, and the road developments consistently follow historical trade routes that linked the Tibetan Plateau with the Indian Subcontinent. Rather than remote and isolated blanks on the map (Shipton and Perrin 1985) – these “geographical blindspots” (Harris 2013) have long been critical but easily overlooked junctures of socio-cultural and political-economic interaction between South, Central, and East Asia.

Trans-Himalayan road developments are transforming Nepal’s northern district of Mustang. An erstwhile Himalayan kingdom and borderland space located at a far remove from the Kathmandu center, state presence in Mustang has long been characterized by its absence. However, as contemporary road projects establish new social and physical links for Mustang
with both central Nepal and Chinese Tibet, new arrangements of both mobility and containment reposition local community members as consumers and citizens of an outwardly territorializing Nepali state. Road infrastructure is a fundamental vector of this change. However, rather than an analysis of infrastructure itself, this study looks to infrastructure construction both socially and materially: as a driver of social reconfiguration and geographical reorientation as well as catalyst of capital accumulation and state formation. In Mustang and more broadly across Nepal, road developments and associated infrastructure projects are experienced both materially and discursively as development – or *bikas* in Nepali – and shape social encounters with modernity and globalization in the Nepal-China borderlands.¹

This dissertation examines infrastructure development in Mustang district to argue that infrastructure is a symbol of national development imaginaries, a process and practice of state making, and a vector for the spatial operations of geopolitical power. I use a dialectical framework of mobility and containment to reveal the materialities that undergird processes of state formation and how cultural practices and geopolitical interests converge in material and territorial ways through roads, borders, commodity circulations, and humanitarian aid. Specifically, I analyze new configurations of these development projects as material processes with distinct territorial outcomes that produce new space for the state to take shape. Particularly in the context of greater Chinese investments in South Asia and future trajectories of Beijing’s One Belt One Road Initiative, I show that infrastructure development in Nepal presents a

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¹ Stacey Leigh Pigg has written broadly on *bikas*, and I use her definition for my examination of development in Nepal as both an ideology of modernity and ‘improvement’ and a material process of connectivity and state formation: “The notion of ‘development’ grips the collective imagination in Nepal. The word for development in Nepali is *bikas*. True to its Sanskrit roots, this word signifies growth, evolution – just as its English equivalent does. In everyday parlance, however, *bikas* for the most part means things, especially commodities that come from elsewhere. Nepalis are often talking about material reality when they use the word *bikas* in daily conversation: water pipes, plastic buckets, electricity, video cassette recorders, trucks, commercial fertilizer, cement buildings, airplanes, new breeds of goats and chickens. Significantly, it is the non-local origin of these things that makes them ‘*bikas*’” (Pigg 1993: 48).
valuable case with which to understand the link between broad international processes of South-South development and local community level experiences with changing subject positions and social stratification.

This project makes key conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to cultural geography, political geography, and development studies. I introduce the concept of border corridors and deploy an analytical framework of mobility and containment to examine how roads, borders, markets, and aid are infrastructural projects that build upon one another in scalar and fractal ways (Green 2005). Specifically, I approach infrastructures as fractal processes and relational constructions that build upon, redirect, augment, and replace one another. Thus, fractal infrastructures are not things with definitive edges, beginnings, or endings (Green 2005: 135) but, rather, interdependent components of broader and more complex processes. Taken together, roads, fences, bureaucracies, and aid become greater than the sum of their parts, visible and experienced as transportation networks, border regimes, trade administrations, and aid packages. These infrastructures intersect and refract one another across trans-Himalayan spaces and, in so doing, reconfigure relationships between states and citizens.

I put mobilities studies in conversation with border studies to argue that road infrastructures and border regimes co-produce and reinforce one another, both disrupting and reinforcing social hierarchies and geopolitical relations. Theoretically, I show how borders do not just divide, but also create movement in new ways and, conversely, how mobility practices generate new mechanisms of containment both socially and institutionally. Methodologically, I advance the mobilities and infrastructural turns by using multi-sited ethnography together with mobile practices along roads and borders to push qualitative approaches from participatory observation to participatory mobility in infrastructural spaces. Finally, I also provide a place-
based and grounded understanding of international infrastructure development that complicates wider geopolitical and policy-based conversations on the ‘benefits for all’ logics of expanding road and trade connections across the trans-Himalaya. This is itself a particularly important critique to make in Nepal, where the promises of infrastructure remain politically powerful and international investment for infrastructure development has reached record levels. In so doing, I also add localized knowledge to broader debates on China in South Asia and show that analysis of road diplomacy presents a new way to study South-South development in Asia and beyond.

**Mobility and Containment**

Everyday experiences in Mustang take place at and are shaped by the dialectical tensions of mobility and containment. This dissertation uses mobility and containment as a framework to examine Mustang’s shifting relationships with state centers across historical regimes of territorial power. Specifically, I put *mobility* – or the ability of people, goods, and ideas to move across spaces and between places – in productive tension with *containment* – or the limits placed upon mobility through particular social and institutional restrictions. The following chapters illustrate how roads and border infrastructures as well as commodity circulations, bureaucratic administrations, and humanitarian aid packages are also material processes that constitute a synthesis of mobility (thesis) with containment (antithesis).

Mobility implies a centrifugal force and, in the case of Mustang, also registers as a historical practice formative to trans-Himalayan geographical imaginaries (Fürer-Haimendorf 1988; van Spengen 2000). Aspects of mobility include: Mustang’s place along the historical trans-Himalayan salt trade; the provenance, cultivation, and legacy of Tibetan Buddhist monastic institutions across the district; Mustang’s key position in Nepal’s Strategic Road Network
development program; the current proliferation of private and motorized vehicle systems in Mustang; and the dynamics of trans-border trade and commerce that connect Mustang’s villages with Chinese manufacturing centers as well as international remittance economies.

Conversely, containment is essentially centripetal, and refers to the ways in which mobilities are foreclosed. Containment constitutes the processes of bordering and delimitations of exclusion that made Mustang into an exceptional borderland space. I conceptualize containment as a process and experience of distinct state intervention and territorialization. An active form of control, containment is similar to but distinctly different from Harris’s theorization of fixity, or a socially situated condition that places limits on mobility through more passive processes expressed by road access (and exclusion) (2013). In Mustang and across wider Nepal, containment includes structural entities such as fences and tax policies that comprise new border regimes as well as limits on social mobility that are conditioned by new road infrastructures and performed through cultural practices. Historical experiences with the state in Mustang are also characterized by containment: suzerainty over the Kingdom of Mustang (Lo) by the region and state’s successive regimes of rule; Nepal-China bordering policies of the 1960s; prohibition of foreigners in Mustang until 1992; Chinese fencing of the border in 1999-2000; and complex Sino-Nepali regulations over trade between Mustang and Tibet.

Together, processes of mobility and containment have converged in borderland spaces like Mustang to make local populations increasingly legible (Scott 1999) to the Kathmandu center and subjects of a modernizing Himalayan state. These convergences take material shape at the roads, the border posts, the trade fairs, and the domestic spaces that mediate social relations between populations in Mustang and communities in Chinese Tibet as well as central Nepal. It is at these points of convergence that the Nepali state increasingly and conspicuously takes material
form – especially in the borderlands – in the shape of institutional bodies designed to expand commerce, tax trade, regulate transport, and cultivate tourism. Bearing in mind ongoing oscillations between mobility and containment, throughout this dissertation I argue that local new mobilities at once transform social and economic relations across trans-Himalayan spaces and undergird material practices that produce space for both markets and the Nepali state to take shape as new mechanisms of containment.

I conceptualize **border corridors** as a material juxtaposition of mobility and containment. Reflected in the perpendicular axes of roads (north-south/up-down/mobility) and fences (east-west/right-left/containment) that intersect at the Nepal-China borders, border corridors also suggest paradoxical dynamics whereby borders generate new relationships and opportunities for circulation while corridors (re)produce particular social and economic exclusions and restrictions. While borders generally exist as barriers to movement – e.g. fences – they also enable the creation of new social relations, exchange patterns, places of accumulation, and orientations for neighbors (Newman and Paasi 1998). Thus, borders can be seen as a kind a resource. Conversely, corridors are passages of mobility between distant places, but also mechanisms of containment that run through intermediate spaces without actually stopping in between. “A passage, covered walk, or avenue between two places,” the Oxford English Dictionary also defines a corridor as a “fortification,” “covered way,” and “an outside gallery or passage connecting one part with another” (Stevenson 2010). While a corridor is thus a means of transit and mobility, it is also inherently contained, and in running to certain places, a corridor affects the spaces it runs *through* differently than the places it runs *to*. I use this border corridor conceptualization in order to understand how roads and trade between China and Nepal unevenly affect highland communities at the places in between – such as Mustang – as well as the ways in
which new corridors facilitate certain processes of capital circulation and state formation in the borderlands.

By examining Mustang as a new border corridor through the dialectical lens of mobility and containment, I argue that shifting configurations of trade networks and sovereign rule have (re)shaped social relations that are in turn expressed through unique but oscillating geographical imaginaries. These imaginaries situate Mustang as a social and physical landscape at the interface of wider Nepali, Tibetan, and Chinese cultural and political worlds. I also use the mobility-containment framework to help unpack and disentangle these imaginaries through key materialities: roads systems, borders and fences, commodities and motorcycles, and international aid and humanitarianism. Illustrative of broader experiences and relationships that further constitute trans-Himalayan geographical imaginaries, these material things mediate the ways in which everyday life and state presence intersect and take shape in Mustang. By using infrastructure as a point of entry for a material and ethnographic engagement with political geography (Megoran 2006), I bring a new analytical approach to both border studies and mobilities studies that helps to complicate current understandings of the relationships between borderland identity and state formation as well as the role of China in South Asia today.

**Methodology**

A case study that links road development, border making, market transformation, and international aid in Mustang, Nepal, this project analyzes the ways in which power operates spatially through the production of new consumer spaces in ethnically-politically sensitive borderland regions. Starting with a road, I look at the ways in which transportation infrastructures transform social relations and political economies and how these transformations,
in turn, motivate new state formations, reshape cultural politics, and reconfigure international geopolitics. Throughout this analysis, I also examine the connections between everyday practices and wider international relations between highland Nepal and Chinese Tibet. Using border roads in Mustang as an analytical and infrastructural entry point, I show how distinct geopolitical, economic, and cultural projects converge in the Nepal-China borderlands in material and territorial ways. By leveraging economic and political connections with China, the Nepali state advances its own state making agenda and generates new terms of mobility and containment for communities in Mustang. On the basis of this analysis, I argue that state formation in Nepal is both a social and institutional process by which infrastructure development and Chinese investment are deployed to produce and territorialize state space.

This dissertation draws on data generated over the course of 30 weeks of multi-sited fieldwork in Tibet and Nepal between November 2014 and August 2015. The main findings were collected from data generated by qualitative research in twenty villages across Mustang in 2015. In addition to Mustang villages and urban centers of Kathmandu (Nepal) and Lhasa (Tibet), I also focused my research on the three operational highways that connect Nepal and China: Nepal-China Arniko-Friendship Highway; Rasuwa-Kyirong Highway; Mustang-Tibet Highway. Between December 2014 and August 2015, I traveled each of these roads in their entirety at least two times and spent as much time as logistically possible at the check-posts and markets located at each border crossing. The majority of my research travel along the roads and to the borders was by self-driven motorcycle. In chronological order, my research sites include Lhasa, Shigatse, Tingri, and Zhangmu (China-Nepal Friendship Highway: November-December 2014); Kathmandu and Kodari (Nepal-China Arniko-Friendship Highway: January-February 2015); Kathmandu and Upper Rasuwa (Rasuwa-Kyirong Highway: February-March 2015);
Pokhara and Mustang (Beni-Jomsom and Mustang-Tibet Road: March-April 2015); Kathmandu and Rasuwa (Rasuwa-Kyirong Highway: April and May 2015); Kathmandu (June 2015) Mustang (Mustang-Tibet Highway: July-August 2015).

*Map 1.1 Nepal-China Trans-Border Road Networks*

In addition to sustained dissertation fieldwork in 2014-15, my analysis also draws on and is informed by over 150 weeks of prior research between 1998 and 2013 on trans-Himalaya roads and trade routes. Specifically between 2000-2010, I walked over 3000 miles of historical pilgrimage and trade routes between Nepal and Tibet as well as additional routes in Bhutan, India, and Pakistan. Bearing witness to the transformation of ancient footpaths into modern highways, these mobile experiences sparked my interest in and inform my contextualized
understanding of the development of border corridors across the trans-Himalaya. In July-August 2013, I also conducted two weeks of preliminary fieldwork in Mustang and began to cultivate the social and logistical basis for more extensive dissertation research in Nepal. Furthermore, after the conclusion of longer-term fieldwork in 2015, I subsequently returned to Nepal in January 2016 and December 2016, during which I made several return visits to the Rasuwa-Kyirong border and conducted more than twenty additional interviews with Mustangi traders, political leaders, and previously established contacts in the Boudha neighborhood of Kathmandu. However, due to the especially complicated and expensive process of gaining special travel permits to both Mustang and Tibet, I have not been able to return to those areas since July 2015 and December 2014, respectively.

My research methods were primarily qualitative and include participant observation, semi-structured interviews ($n=200$), household surveys ($n=60$), focus groups ($n=5$), textual and discourse analysis (Nepali and Chinese state and independent media and development reports), historical and archival research (government records on border policies and social histories of trans-Himalayan traders), and mobile ethnography (foot, horse, motorcycle, jeep, truck, and bus travel with local participants). Research informants were identified through random and snowball sampling, including personal connections in Kathmandu as well as social, familial, and professional networks maintained by colleagues and acquaintances in Mustang and Rasuwa.

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2 Both Tibet and Mustang are especially challenging areas to conduct long-term fieldwork. Under the current Chinese leadership but also for the past several decades, it has been extremely difficult to obtain official permission for academic research in the Tibet Autonomous Region. While tourism is possible, individual travel remains complicated as well. During my fieldwork, for example, I traveled as a ‘group of one’ with the requisite guide, driver, and pre-planned itinerary while staying in ‘tourist-class’ hotels. Research in Mustang is also complicated because the Government of Nepal’s Ministry of Home Affairs and Department of Tourism require expensive permits for foreign travel to the district’s northern areas of Upper Mustang. While research activities are permitted, it costs a minimum of $50/per day along with additional expenses for requisite guides, food, lodging, transport, etc. In both Tibet and Mustang, my ‘guides’ were in fact research assistants. The earthquakes of 2015 also disrupted my research agenda because broken roads, closed borders, and shifting policies for travel to affected regions proscribed my ability to return to both Upper Mustang and Tibet in Summer 2015.
While random sampling enabled data collection from a wide range of informants from diverse backgrounds and who practiced various livelihoods, it also led to numerous dead-end interviews and was more time-consuming due to the need to establish social rapport before delving into my inquiries. Snowball sampling, while generally more efficient, risked the creation of collecting imbalanced perspectives that privileged the perspectives shared by other informants and interlocutors with whom my research assistants and I already had established relationships. In both cases, informants were drawn from a diverse range of age, gender, class, caste, and ethnic groups as well as multiple citizenship nationalities. This includes, but is not limited to, drivers, traders, shopkeepers, farmers, pastoralists, monks, hoteliers, guides, students, government officials, and political leaders in Mustang; drivers, guides, pilgrims, shopkeepers, traders, and construction workers in Tibet/China; and drivers, traders, shopkeepers, hoteliers, border guards, police officers, military details, government officials, and students elsewhere in Nepal.

My field research questions asked about personal experiences with the following topics: new road systems, border regimes, trans-border trade, cash-based vs. barter-based trade relations, commodity circulations, capital accumulation, conspicuous consumption, Nepali state services, Chinese political power, ethnic identity, geopolitics, earthquake emergencies, natural disaster, global humanitarianism, national crises, international aid, social mobility and institutional containment, tourism, foreign direct investment (FDI), pastoralist and agricultural practices, inter-village social relations, social transformations, and cultural practices of the Tibet-Nepal borderlands. Themes and questions were prepared on the basis of preliminary research in Mustang in Summer 2013 as well as incorporated on a more a priori basis as I learned and became interested in new topics that I didn’t even know to ask before commencing more extended fieldwork on 2014-15.
My household survey questionnaires asked questions such as: How much of your food/clothes/furniture/etc. comes from Tibet/China? For how many years?; How much of your food/clothes/furniture/etc. comes from Nepal/Pokhara? For how many years?; What goods are better quality from Nepal?; What goods are better quality from Tibet/China?; Do you think the road from Tibet is a good thing? Why or why not?; Do you think the road from Nepal is a good thing? Why or why not?; What things came from Tibet in the past but now come from Nepal?; What things came from Nepal in the past but now come from Tibet?; How has Mustang's relationship with Tibet changed since your parents' generation? I coded my research data according to themes that reflect the social and political dynamics of mobility and containment. These themes include, but are not limited to: goods, quality, roads, aid, fence, tsongra (Tib. seasonal trade fair), trade, markets, tax, preferences, Nepal, China, Tibet, geopolitics, citizenship, trust, fear, power, development, bikas (Nep. development), nyetsang (Tib. fictive kinship network), state, territory, aid, mobility, containment.

While writing this dissertation, I have published preliminary findings as well as more critical analyses in a number of journals and edited volumes. Therefore, this dissertation includes short sections and extracts that have been previously published or accepted and pending future publication. However, none of my chapters have yet been published as single, stand-alone articles. Publications have appeared in The Annals of the American Association of Geographers (Murton 2017b), Eurasian Geography and Economics (Murton, Lord, and Beazley 2016), South Asia: Journal of South Asia Studies (Murton 2017a); Cross Currents (Murton 2016b), Perspectives on Global Development and Technology (Murton 2013), The Routledge Handbook on Asian Borderlands (Murton forthcoming 2018), HIMALAYA (Lord and Murton 2017
Exploring new approaches to mobile methods (Cidell and Lechtenberg 2016; Miller and Ponto 2016; Merriman 2013), I also combined participant observations with extensive mobility practice, including travel by motorcycle, jeep, truck, horse, and foot throughout Upper and Lower Mustang as well as other Nepal-China border crossings. This participatory-mobile approach enabled me to experience and assess the impact of relatively new vehicle and road systems on the material and mobile life of numerous Mustang communities from the ground up. My mobile approach builds on Burawoy’s work on grounded global ethnography (2003; Burawoy et al. 2000) to understand how globalization can be observed and experienced not just in a localized yet global place such as an urban restaurant kitchen but also along a new, rural highway. These mobile ethnographic experiences include the ways in which expectations of arrival generate new urgencies between destinations as well as disenchantment with new temporal orientations that arise while sitting on the side of the road waiting for a vehicle that may or may not ever come. By also borrowing and advancing methodological conceptualization on “ambulatory ethnography” from Ulla Berg (2015) and “pathways” as both a concept and fieldsite from Martin Saxer (2016), I productively employed this peripatetic qualitative approach to ethnographic fieldwork in a distinctly vehicular context. This methodology allowed me to shift my work on mobilities from theoretical paradigm (Sheller and Urry 2006) to participatory practice.

By traveling primarily by motorcycle and then foot and/or horseback once I reached roads’ end, I experienced and shared the vagaries of road-based transportation in Mustang today. More importantly, moments and complications of road travel provided grounded and
contextualized insights at many junctures of genuine participant observation-frustration. This includes travel disruptions due to motorcycles that suffered from altitude sickness, cold nights marooned on the banks of riverside gorges following nighttime hijacking by drunken members of the truck driver syndicates, and gaining and testing the trust of local networks when a borrowed motorcycle was left stored with strangers for weeks at a time. Experiences of visceral fear and bodily danger made me truly understand the unpredictability and hazards of travel by vehicle along the new roads of Mustang. This was especially profound in the immediate aftermath of the Nepal earthquakes in April-May 2015, when groups quickly collaborated to locate alternative passages because many roads were closed, blocked, and broken. Sharing anxieties and alarm with co-passengers in southbound jeeps – and then being stuck by landslides and unable to travel by the road at all – the challenges, disruptions, expedience, and unpredictability of life on (and off) the roads became part of my everyday experience.

Towards a place-based ethnography of geopolitics that reflects wider national, regional, and international trends, I use literature and theory on mobilities (discussed more below) to interpret ethnographic narratives about the role and place of roads in the context of new development agendas and political relations between Nepal and China. This enables me to do for geopolitics what Kwan and Schwanen call upon for transportation studies – to generate and leverage small qualitative data to texture and nuance larger analyses of big quantitative metrics (2016: 252). In addition to taking an historical view of the cultural and geographic specificities of mobilities in Mustang, I use mobile and participatory ethnography to bridge multiple scales and cultivate a richer, more nuanced understanding of how mobilities affect everyday life and broader geographic imaginaries in the trans-Himalaya.
**Dissertation Structure**

This dissertation comprises four research chapters framed by this introduction and a conclusion. The four research chapters are based on distinct material themes that build upon and advance one another: *Roads, Fences, Goods*, and *Aid*. I use mobility and containment as a driving framework throughout my analysis, and in so doing illustrate the ways that infrastructure, borders, commerce, and humanitarianism converge in the production and territorialization of state space. As a geographic analysis of infrastructure development and towards a more localized understanding of Asian geopolitics, I bridge scales across the trans-Himalaya to show how infrastructure development is grounded and shaped both by international geopolitical relations and regional socio-cultural practices, specifically between Mustang and Tibet.

*Chapter 1: Roads* analyzes three infrastructural, cultural, and socio-economic implications of road development in Mustang to argue that roads and new mobility practices advance state making, reinscribe social relations, and shift geographic imaginaries in the Nepal-China borderlands. Specifically, I examine how local experiences with roads and vehicles intersect with socio-cultural traditions in Mustang to (re)shape both material practices and social relations across the region. Building on my mobility-containment framework, I examine: 1) the expansion of Nepal’s Strategic Road Network; 2) the declining cultural practices of trans-Himalayan *nyetsang* social systems; and 3) the ways in which road access and exclusion reproduce social hierarchies throughout Mustang. From these analyses, I argue that the development of road infrastructure in Mustang has facilitated new configurations of mobility and containment at local, regional, and trans-national levels that both disrupt and reinforce socio-cultural legacies established with Mustang’s location along trans-Himalayan trade routes. I also show how local experiences with social and economic mobilities connect to geographic
imaginaries across trans-Himalayan spaces. In so doing, I lay the groundwork for analysis in subsequent chapters on how infrastructure projects are both material and social processes that expand and build upon one another in scalar and fractal ways and that, in turn, produce space for both markets and the Nepali state to take shape through new mechanisms of containment.

Chapter 2: Fences analyzes the spatial operations of power in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands to argue that border regimes are made, maintained, and performed as territorial processes of control over distinct political economic and socio-cultural practices. To make this argument, I bring both history and ethnography to bear on border studies in order to write a boundary biography (Megoran 2006, 2012) about a fence. Specifically, this biography analyzes the Mustang-Tibet border at two different registers: 1) the physical (or external) location of the border as a marker of state territory between Nepal and China; and 2) the social and cultural (or internal) location of the border for borderland populations and how socio-cultural considerations influence border making (Sahlins 1989) for both China and Nepal. To write this biography, I examine three key moments that reflect important state interventions and which have together shaped the Mustang-Tibet border as it is experienced today: 1) the 1961 Boundary Treaty between the Kingdom of Nepal and the People’s Republic of China; 2) the construction of a Nepal-China border fence by Chinese authorities in 1999; and 3) the protracted suspension of Nepal-China Border Citizens’ mobility rights for Mustang (and also Tibetan) communities. Using my mobility-containment framework to examine an ethnographic history at the Nepal-China border through these three specific changes over time, this chapter shows how borders materialize, dematerialize, and rematerialize and how borderlanders’ identities and geographic imaginaries are shaped and reoriented by the border. Illustrating how borders enable particular terms of mobility for some while defining different rules of containment for others, I open up a
new view into borders as resource and show how borderlanders’ identities are often shaped and maintained with and across the border rather than against the border itself (Sahlins 1989).

Chapter 3: Goods examines transformations in exchange relations between Mustang and Tibet to argue that consumption practices connect circulations of capital with the territorialization of state space. Facilitated by new road-linked mobilities, communities in Mustang increasingly participate in capitalist political economies that are entwined with the circulation of Chinese manufactured commodities and mediated by cash exchanges. By considering the various factors that have led to recent changes with semi-annual, trans-Himalayan trade fairs, or tsongra, I illustrate the infrastructural connections between cash-based economies, the import of Chinese goods, and the creation of new Nepali bureaucracies. Specifically, I examine these infrastructural entanglements in three contexts: 1) cash, consumption, and tourism; 2) tsongra, taxation, and transport; and 3) regulation as mobility and containment. Using consumption, accumulation, and taxation to make a link between material practices with processes of territoriality (Sack 1983; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Elden 2013), I develop a material-territorial analytic to see the state (Corbridge et al. 2005) in Mustang through the administrative ‘effects’ (Painter 2006, 2010) of regulation. In so doing, I show how everyday consumerism and bureaucratic institutions operate together in the formation of markets and production of state space. Finally, while contextualizing the penetration of new economic relations and infrastructural projects into Mustang as a spatial fix for the over-accumulation of Chinese capital, the chapter also shows that trans-border circulations of Chinese goods and international cash flows have in turn generated a new profile of the Nepali state in a borderland district where significant state presence has been historically absent.
Chapter 4: Aid presents a reflexive examination of the 2015 Himalayan earthquakes to argue that China’s increasingly prominent role in Nepal advances Nepali state formation while it also addresses Beijing’s own economic and security interests abroad. Situating my analysis of Nepal’s development imaginary during a moment of national crisis in which I participated in relief efforts as a volunteer and ‘accidental humanitarian’ (Lord and Murton 2017 forthcoming), I examine how recent physical, social, political, and economic disruptions across the trans-Himalaya have opened space for new Chinese interventions in Nepal. Specifically, I use both personal and national earthquake experiences to contextualize the trajectory and expansion of Chinese aid to Nepal and the geopolitical implications and social constraints generated by this aid relationship. My analysis focuses on Chinese interventions in three key contexts: 1) Nepal’s earthquake emergency in 2015; 2) Chinese aid to Nepal since 2014; and 3) Sino-Nepal geopolitics and connections between infrastructural imaginaries and extra-territorial practices since 2016. The chapter also analyzes how state-making happens in two, complementary modes – the physical dimensions of infrastructure that undergird state formation and the discursive grounds of legitimacy that are fundamental to national claims of state making and development – which is itself another form of infrastructure development and articulated in Nepal as bikas.

Roads in Context: Examining Infrastructures, Mobilities, and Borders

Bringing infrastructure back to the ground

Infrastructures are making headlines and inspiring new research worldwide. From the 2016 US Presidential elections to China’s growing outward and overseas investments, promises of infrastructure development are increasingly at the forefront of political debates and academic analysis. As such, recent years have seen a proliferation of social science studies of
infrastructure. Opening up new analytical spaces, these studies examine and engage with infrastructure in multiple different analytical directions (Appel et al. 2015; McFarlane et al. 2016), including but not limited to social relations and forms of power (Harvey and Knox 2015; Björkman 2015; Anand 2011; Larkin 2008), categories and standardizations (Carse and Lewis 2017; Star and Ruler 1996; Bowker 1994), scale-making capacities and ontological transformations (Ghertner 2015; Easterling 2014; Larkin 2013; Edwards 2003), and the social imaginaries and discursive power of material development projects (Wilson 2004; Harvey et al. 2017; Harvey and Knox 2012). A quick glance at the annual conference proceedings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and American Association of Geographers (AAG) shows that in 2016 and 2017 alone, ‘infrastructure’ was included in the title of at least 42 AAA panels and as a keyword in no fewer than 175 papers at AAG.

And yet, belying this proliferation of ‘infrastructure studies,’ the word infrastructure is notably absent from both classic and current volumes that define essential terms across the social sciences. For example, Raymond Williams’s classic text, Keywords (2011 [1976]), provides no reference for infrastructure (in a contemporary, developmental sense) beyond its relevance to fundamental Marxist theorizations of historical materialism. More recently, infrastructure finds no entry whatsoever in the Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology (Barnard and Spencer 2010). In the Dictionary of Human Geography (Gregory et al. 2009), infrastructure is defined in two limited terms with respect to conventional economic theory and Marxist theory. This imbalance between infrastructure’s absence in classic scholarship and its popularity in current cross-disciplinary conversations has led some scholars to suggest that the study of infrastructure entails a new turn in social science (Harvey et al. 2017). While some have asked
when (and why) infrastructure became trendy, I propose that a more productive question is: what can infrastructure studies tell us about 21st century geopolitics and social relations across Asia?

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define infrastructures as material configurations that expand in fractal and scalar ways. Building upon, augmenting, replacing, and refracting one another, these infrastructures facilitate both mobility and containment with profound social and political impacts. More fundamentally, the infrastructures that comprise this study are material projects that generate uneven social outcomes. Thinking of infrastructures as ‘doubly relational’ with both internal multiplicities and outwardly connective capacities (Harvey et al. 2017), I build on Harvey et al.’s provisional (and self-described ‘minimal’) definition: “technologically mediated, dynamic forms that continuously produce and transform socio-technical relations. Infrastructures, that is, are extended material assemblages that generate effects and structure social relations, either through engineered (i.e. planned and purposefully crafted) or non-engineered (i.e. unplanned and emergent) activities” (2017: 8).

An archaeology of infrastructure as a keyword tells a continually unfolding story of globalizing utilization and appropriation. Drawing a historical distinction that reflects Raymond Williams’s cultural materialist critique (Williams 1973a), Carse shows that “infrastructure was initially an organizational and accounting term used to distinguish the construction of work that was literally conducted beneath un laid tracks (roadbeds) or was otherwise organizationally prior to them (surveys, plans, bridges, tunnels, embankments) from the superstructure of roads, train stations, and workshops that were situated above or constructed after the tracks” (2017: 29). Carse goes on to reveal how infrastructure has been deployed both materially and rhetorically for military purposes from logistical systems to supranational integration. Having co-opted the term from French urban engineers and development planners, in the post-war years, “infrastructure
was more than a word. It was world-making” (Carse 2017: 31). Identified and promoted in US President Truman’s 1949 articulation of development as a technological modernist project to be led by the Western world (Rostow 1960), infrastructure became synonymous with expertise, improvement, and intervention. As national aid organizations and NGOs borrowed logistical thinking from military models, national highways, electrical grids, and (air)ports merged with newly designated industrial zones in a proliferation of infrastructural expansionism. This dynamic is exemplified in few areas more compellingly than the global pace of hydropower construction in the 1960s, when new dams were constructed at the rate of one dam per day (Khagram 2004). If this trajectory of global development means that “infrastructure was Cold War politics by other means,” (Carse 2017: 33), then many of the new “sinews of development” (Sneddon 2012) have come to reshape today’s world through a material manifestation of post-Cold War infrastructural scrambling. As of 2017, the outward growth of physical infrastructures comprising transportation and communication installations includes an ongoing extension to new systems of standardization, classification, and logistics that include health, education, financial, and social services (Graham and Marvin 2001; Edwards et al. 2007; Harvey et al. 2017).

In recent decades, social science studies of infrastructure have been strongly influenced by relational modes of analysis that examine how technology affects organizational transformation. In their landmark 1996 paper, Star and Ruhleder posed the question, “What is the relationship between large-scale infrastructure and organizational change? Who (or what) is changer, and who changed?” (1996: 112). This inquiry led to their argument that the real question is not what is an infrastructure, but rather, when is an infrastructure? By suggesting the dynamic relational dimensions of infrastructure rather than a more static and material thingness, Star and Ruhleder’s study of a geographically dispersed, sophisticated digital communication
system for a community of scientists illuminates how “infrastructure is something that emerges for people in practice, connected to activities and structures” (1996: 112). Following the inter-relational thinking of Jewett and Kling (1991), Star and Ruhleder’s work has inspired much research in Science and Technology Studies that engages infrastructure as “a fundamentally relational concept. It becomes infrastructure in relation to organized practices” (1996: 113).

STS examinations of the relational dimensions of infrastructural systems are especially valuable for the study of foundational networks that are often overlooked and not readily apparent to quick glances. By shedding light on the relational properties of often ‘invisible’ entanglements, Star and Ruhleder make the opaque transparent and contribute to the ‘infrastructural inversion’ (Bowker 1994) by which a “substrate becomes substance” (Star and Ruhleder 1996: 113). From early-stage cyber networks and medical classifications to 21st century gas pipelines and shipping containers, this inverted thinking on infrastructure supports cross-scalar analyses that reveal both the relationality and the materiality of infrastructural processes.

Thus, “an infrastructure occurs when the tension between local and global is resolved. That is, an infrastructure occurs when local practices are afforded by a larger-scale technology, which can then be used in a natural, ready-to-hand fashion” (Star and Ruhleder 1996: 114). Although the infrastructural inversion has inspired a rich body of literature that unpacks and problematizes the very systems that many take for granted and that, in fact, make the world go round, I depart from Star and Ruhleder on the basis of several “infrastructural dimensions” that comprise their definition of infrastructure. While many of their “dimensions” resonate with my approach to infrastructure – such as embeddedness, transparency, reach or scope, built on an installed base, and visible upon breakdowns, others are less central to the infrastructures of this study, including
learned as part of membership, links with conventional practice, and embodiment of standards (1996: 113).

Building upon previous scholarship (e.g. Bowker and Star 1999), recent studies of infrastructure also attend largely to the *infra* or substrate dimensions of infrastructure in order to render loud and apparent the otherwise ‘silent’ or ‘invisible’ natures of systems of standardization, categorization, and globalization (Easterling 2014). This scholarship illuminates the relationalities of infrastructures and shows that “invisibility is central to the *infra*-structural quality of a system” (Harvey et al. 2017: 5). By highlighting the frequently overlooked elements (and uneven outcomes) of infrastructural systems, this continuation of the ‘infrastructural inversion’ brings critical attention to the processes and codes of standardizations and classifications – or what Barry (2006) calls ‘technological zones’ – and the social impacts of embedded infrastructural arrangements. Accordingly, infrastructures are revealed as “spaces where differences in practices, procedures, and forms are reduced through common connection standards” (Carse and Lewis 2017: 12).

Modern global assemblages are predicated on standards regimes (Ong and Collier 2005) that function to link local and global socio-technical systems (Latour 2005) into infrastructural zones. By tracing linkages and assemblages of often invisible connections, new materialism (Bennett 2010; Connolly 2013; Easterling 2014) problematizes the vast range and heterogeneity of what is taken up in contemporary social science studies of infrastructure, including but not limited to cyber communication networks, international financial transactions, transoceanic logistics systems, and domestic health codes. While important scholarship on science and technology addresses the social constructionism of infrastructure (Edwards 2003), or what Bowker identifies as the “infrastructural work” (1994: 10) accomplished through systems of
standardization, my interest here does not prioritize classifications and the (in)visible outcomes illuminated by infrastructural inversions. Following but also departing from this scholarship and previous work on the interdependencies of global assemblages (Sassen 2006; Tsing 2005), this project examines infrastructure to reveal not just the physical and economic connections that they produce but also the social and material disruptions that infrastructures generate.

Advancing prior work on the sublime power of colonial infrastructural systems (Larkin 2008) and in response to the infrastructural inversion, Larkin has more recently pointed to the power of infrastructure to accomplish both material and ideological political aims (2013). Rather than examining the invisible and overlooked systems that undergird human and non-human interactions, Larkin renews attention to the spectacular power of infrastructure and to both the poetics and the politics of infrastructural forms. For Larkin, such projects comprise an “amalgam of technical, administrative, and financial techniques that emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function” (2013: 328–29). For this project, I follow Larkin’s review to understand how infrastructures in both material and discursive forms enable the movement of goods, people, and ideas and the exchange of these entities across space. Thinking of infrastructures as social and material, invisible and conspicuous, a productive tension between Bowker and Larkin opens analytical space to examine how roads and fences interact as infrastructures that enable some movements while disabling other flows, or how infrastructures both mobilize and contain people, places, things, ideas, and the always shifting social relations between them.

In full view of the reality that roads and bus timetables – or infrastructures of transportation – are frequently (and paradoxically) noticed only when they stop working, this
project is instead motivated by the very visibility of infrastructures in the Nepal-China borderlands today. By attending to these appearances in both physical and rhetorical terms, I explore the multi-temporality of infrastructural visibility – the spectacular profiles and discursive power that circulate before the actual roads, railways, or dry-ports are constructed as well as what happens in social and political terms once such infrastructural developments are set in the ground. That is, rather than examining the invisible aspects of infrastructural systems following previous inversions, this project instead explores how large-scale, material infrastructural projects frequently reinforce socio-spatial marginalizations that are routinely elided in wider policy discourses and infrastructural imaginaries. That is, I ask what new infrastructures in the trans-Himalaya mean and accomplish, and for whom and at what costs? In other words, I aim to reinterpret the claim recently made by Harvey et al. (2017), that “the projects of the powerful and the engagements of the poor are thus thoroughly entangled in this contemporary drive to ‘leverage the future’” (2017: 1).

By reverting the infrastructural inversion – or flipping infrastructures back onto the ground – I look to the material and spectacular components of multi-scale infrastructure projects and both the discursive and disruptive work that they do. That is, I respond to Harvey et al.’s call to examine some “different kinds of inversion” (2017: 7). To make this reversion, I examine transformations to road systems, border regimes, trade networks, and aid packages that increasingly reconfigure social and political relations between Mustang and Kathmandu as well as Nepal and China more broadly. In so doing, I aim to shed a critical new light on often overlooked places like Mustang that are increasingly relevant to but often unmentioned in global headlines. Through both ethnographic and textual analysis, I reveal the staggering disjunctures between economic and policy driven infrastructural imaginaries – or what Harvey and Knox call
‘the enchantments of infrastructure’ (2012) – and the grounded realities for those subject to (and often unevenly affected by) such infrastructural interventions.

Following recent work by Rankin et al. (2017) on the political histories of road development in Nepal, I approach infrastructure across multiple, intersecting scales as particular “regimes of territorialization.” Borrowing from Wilson (2004), this territorializing consideration of infrastructure seeks to understand the ways in which land becomes a terrain of political control for different, and often conflicting, projects of rule. Building on the challenges posed to hierarchical thinking about the penetration of the global into the local (Massey 1991, 1994), analyses of infrastructure as regimes of territorialization instead “emphasize how the local, regional, national, global inter-penetrate one another in any given space, both through efforts to rule and efforts to resist or subvert rule” (Rankin et al. 2017: 45). While looking at the territorializing power that central states attempt to leverage through infrastructure, I also unearth the disjuncture between ambitious planning objectives and the messy outcomes of such interventions. A central aim of this project is to illuminate this critical and uneven gap.

In this dissertation, I suggest that highways and fences in Mustang (as with railways, dams, pipelines, airports, and other large infrastructures elsewhere) should be “seen as a social relation and a political regime as much as a physical feature of the landscape” (Rankin et al. 2017: 44). As such, I aim to make a deeper investigation into the co-production of infrastructures and states as spaces of social, political, and economic interaction across multiple scales. Like the extension of the Chinese railway from Beijing to Lhasa and beyond, I consider these infrastructures as “stretched out spaces of social relations” (Wilson 2004). Modes of linkage (and breakage) through and across which new values are formed and flow, trans-Himalayan infrastructure development also represent what Paul Robbins identifies as a kind of socio-
material dynamic. That is, infrastructures are “not merely isolated objects in an unfortunate state of momentary geographic association,” but, rather “a set of connected sites through which value flows, which are mutually constituted by their relationships along far more vast chains of accumulation.” (Robbins 2014: 233-35). As cogs that help to run larger machines of global capitalist relations, infrastructure development across the Asian highlands serve to both bridge and shatter the perceived social and economic divides between urban centers and rural peripheries.

Infrastructures are themselves both a material construction and social relation but also a mode of production made to support higher capital accumulation. Using ethnographic methods and critical analysis to help “open up the black box of infrastructure” (Carse 2017: 35), my analytical approach brings cultural materialism (Williams 1973a) to bear on modern processes of international development. Conceptualizing a metaphorical-theoretical reflection of Williams’s framework on Marxian models of political economy as a predetermined base (or infra-structure) and a determined super-structure (political-economic objectives) (Williams 1973b), I situate contemporary and local-regional infrastructure projects at the foundation of larger geopolitical and geoeconomic strategies of global integration and connectivity. That is, I interrogate trans-local, ground-level infrastructural networks across the Nepal-China borderlands to reveal how centrally planned, politically-economically ambitious infrastructure projects shape and are shaped by broader development initiatives, which also yield uneven experiences and power asymmetries with their own kinds of discursive force (Larkin 2013). Tracing how a small and local road project has expanded and been tied into larger international road networks, border regimes, tax policies, and aid packages, I analyze the scalar and fractal growth of
infrastructural systems and what happens to populations that are subject to (and yet often skipped over by) new forms of political and economic ‘connectivity.’

By focusing on the grounded experiences and uneven outcomes of trans-border infrastructures, I follow Madeline Akrich’s (1992) call for the de-scription of both the physical and the social aspects of technological objects. Through a de-scription of the political-economic, social, and material components of new trans-Himalayan infrastructural systems, I highlight the ways in which development projects across the Nepal-China borderlands bring great benefit to some while passing many others by. In so doing, I further illustrate what Carse identifies as the “re-scription of technical installations,” a double movement that tacks “back and forth between the ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ of infrastructures – between the realities projected by their organizers and the social worlds in which materials are assembled” (2017: 36).

I also look to large-scale, international and material infrastructures to redraw attention to visible things in rural places and return to analytical subjects that have been recently overlooked in other infrastructure studies. This includes infrastructure as a state mode of development in non-urban landscapes and the ways in which infrastructures build upon and expand on one another in complex, fractal configurations of both mobility and containment. While many recent and excellent studies of infrastructure take up the political power of infrastructural connections in urban political ecological contexts (MacFarlane 2008; Anand 2011; Björkman 2015; MacFarlane et al. 2017), fewer analyses attend to the cross-scalar dimensions of infrastructural integration across local, national, and international levels, particularly in rural and mountainous environments (Harvey and Knox 2015). Moreover, while fences, walls, and other territorializing infrastructures have long been a focus of border studies scholarship (Jones 2015; Johnson et al.
2011), less work has been done in political geography that puts borders in conversation with (im)mobilities through the lens of infrastructure.

Throughout this dissertation, I am especially interested in the material growth and spatial evolution of infrastructures, or the ways that heterogeneous infrastructures come into being for multiple political purposes. Instead of looking at singular typological units (like sewers or pipes or electrical grids), I instead examine how one infrastructural intervention (like a road) intersects with another infrastructure (like a fence) and how the dynamics of mobility and containment that they generate shape other material and social infrastructural forms like trade systems and aid programs. In so doing, I push against other writing on infrastructure that engages infrastructures through “the emergent effects, the ways in which specific material transformations shape social worlds, and create new environments. Here the question is less about how a system comes into being, than it is about the life worlds that such systems sustain and/or destroy” (Harvey in Venkatesan et al. 2016: 3).

In order to add critical development thinking to wider geographic conversations on both the physical and social impacts of rural infrastructure as well as the material intersections of mobilities and borders, this study examines the processual and material ways in which a relatively small road project has transformed into a far more complex border regime and geopolitical arrangement expressed through trade and aid between Nepal and China. Like the foundation beds of railways that laid the groundwork for larger transportation systems and international logistical coordination, I start with a locally built road from Lo Monthang to the Chinese border as a foundational infrastructure with fractal properties of outwardly expanding effects. These properties and effects are visible by looking at some of the new infrastructures that the road has inspired – fences, bureaucracies, development policies – and how they have also
become intertwined with greater super-structural political, economic, and social assemblages. More fundamentally, this dissertation seeks to understand what is being built across the trans-Himalaya today, why, to what ends, and for whom. By looking at the pace of infrastructure development across Nepal, Tibet, and elsewhere, I show how such projects comprise not just *infra*-structures – or that which is beneath – but also *inter*-structures – or that which is between and among, fracturing scales and (re)connecting communities and the states that they comprise across both time and space.

Infrastructure development across the trans-Himalayan borderlands is highly visible, symbolic, and politically complex. For example, the Qinghai-Tibet railroad made headlines across the world when it was launched (well ahead of schedule) in July 2006. Incidentally, the one and only motorable road connecting China with India was (re)opened the very same week across the Nathu-la in Sikkim, marking a diplomatic breakthrough closely tied to infrastructural connectivity and imagined economic cooperation. Today, the Tibetan railroad is being extended westward further across the Tibetan Plateau and is expected to reach China’s border with Nepal near Kyirong by 2020 (Nyaichyai 2016). This expansion of road and rail connections across highly contested borderlands points to the ways in which infrastructural projects figure into complex geopolitical relations and regional economic objectives. Furthermore, such conspicuous infrastructures are both symbolic and material indexes of development and prosperity for highland communities, state officials, and foreign donors alike.

China’s ambitious One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR) exemplifies the discursive and political power of international infrastructure development today. Also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), OBOR is at the forefront of Beijing’s effort to become a 21st century developmentalist state through infrastructural connectivity (Sidaway and Woon 2017).
Specifically, the initiative comprises two ambitious projects of global connectivity. On land, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” envisions new infrastructures in the form of roads, railways, industrial parks and special economic zones stretching across Central Asia to Europe. On water, the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” focuses on maritime trade routes, deep-water ports, and special development zones throughout the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. In order to work outside of (and largely circumvent) the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, Beijing is also mobilizing its enormous financial resources through powerful policy banks and dedicated financial infrastructures such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund.

While OBOR does not yet exist in any material or structural sense, its existence is very much already established as an international Chinese project with both political power and brand recognition. A reified cart that seems to move well ahead of its horse, the breadth of ambition and depth of investment behind OBOR has generated exceptional global expectations. In May 2017, representatives of 57 countries, among them leaders of 29 states, convened in Beijing for the first Belt and Road Forum (BRF). As Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged $78 billion dollars in outward infrastructural investment, many countries across Asia have shifted orientations towards Beijing for economic assistance and political patronage (Economist 2017). Far exceeding its investment to Nepal, Beijing recently committed $55 billion towards the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and as of 2017, surpassed the United States as Pakistan’s top source of FDI (Bloomberg 2017). While these commitments stand at altogether unprecedented levels, in most instances the gifts delivered have yet to match the promises made. A key crossroads of development gifts and (inter)national promises, trans-border road construction for Nepal provides a key link between national imaginaries of a modern state with strategic
integration into China’s broader OBOR expansionism. In order to contextualize the unprecedented significance and disruption of new Chinese infrastructural interventions in Nepal, it is also necessary to examine the geopolitical history of India-Nepal international relations in the context of roads, borders, identity, and aid.

*India in Nepal: The geopolitics of borders and roads*

The geopolitical history of Indo-Nepali relations is a long and complex socio-political story that exceeds the limits of this dissertation. However, in view of the increasing economic and political presence of Beijing in Nepal, it is necessary to first consider historical and shifting geopolitical arrangements between Delhi and Kathmandu in order to contextualize international infrastructure development in the present moment. I enter this complex history through the focal lenses of this dissertation - roads, borders, identity, and aid.

As discussed in the following chapter, India played a central role in the construction of Nepal’s first major, international road, the Tribhuvan Raj Marg, and in so doing, established Nepal’s first (and at the time only) international transport connection. While Nepal was the world’s only Hindu monarchy with critical social, cultural, economic, and political links to India, the new road nevertheless established new Nepal-Indian connections that exceeded longstanding religious, linguistic, and financial configurations. The import of Indian goods – from grain and salt to fuel and vehicles – quickly transformed long-standing political economies across Nepal (Rose 1971), including those that maintained crucial connections to Tibet and China (I discuss a key dimension of this transformation more extensively in Chapter 3 in the context of the Trans-Himalayan Salt Trade). Along with the high-volume provisioning of import commodities from India, Kathmandu soon found itself in a highly dependent aid relationship with Delhi that
translated into powerful political capital that India’s political parties leveraged for Indian economic interests in Nepal. Although Nepal has received billions of dollars in international aid and investment over the decades (Hagen 2012), the Indo-Nepali entanglements of roads, aid, and soft power are particularly close. And it is this very dynamic that China is quickly disrupting in the 21st century.

Borders are also a key point of geopolitical contest between Kathmandu, Delhi, and Beijing. Nepal and India share an open border and migrant labor passes freely across without the administration of security checkpoints or passport control. For example, this labor includes daily wage-work for citizens of Nepal’s southern districts as well as long-term, residential occupations for Nepali domestic workers in India’s major cities. As discussed more extensively below, China and Nepal do not maintain an equally open border, although allowances do exist for small-scale daily trade relations through the Nepal-China Border Citizen policy. More important to note is Delhi’s historical concern (even preoccupation) with the security of the Sino-Nepali border, particularly with respect to Nepal’s western districts of Humla and Mustang (Cowan 2015, 2016). During the height of Cold War politics and the Chinese occupation of Tibet in the 1960s, Delhi maintained surveillance stations across Nepal’s northern border to monitor the westward expansion of Chinese military installations (Rose 1971). The presence of these intelligence-gathering units was not missed on Chinese forces and, as discussed more extensively in Chapter 3, the Indian outposts were largely removed following the 1960 ‘Mustang Incident’ between Nepali and Chinese border patrols (Cowan 2016). While the borders between Nepal and China have since been delimited and resolved, and the borders between Nepal and India remain open and heavily crossed, tension at and across these borders continues to fuel conflict and new geopolitical configurations between Kathmandu, Delhi, and Beijing.
Ethnic identity and the movement of minority populations is a key point of border conflict and broader geopolitical tension between Nepal, India, and China. For example, the majority of Tibetan refugees exit China for Nepal during the course of exile journeys to India. For decades, Beijing has lobbied Kathmandu to extradite Tibetan exiles and insisted on their (forced) return to China; in contrast, Delhi has welcomed hundreds of thousands of Tibetans onto Indian soil. What began as road-building camps for new refugees in the 1960s have grown into economically productive and politically active Tibetan towns in the Indian states of Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, and Jammu and Kashmir, amongst others. While India’s accommodation of the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala continues to draw Chinese ire, Delhi remains committed to the settlement of Tibetans who reach Indian territory. However, new Nepal-China trade and transit policies, particularly those articulated in the 2016 Joint Statement and discussed more closely in Chapter 5, indicate a new transformation in border patrol practices that are intended to reverse Tibetan exile movements into India and, instead, extradite exiles according to the particular security interests of the Chinese Communist Party.

Nepal’s Madhesi population is also a point of conflict between Kathmandu and Delhi. While Madhesi constitute nearly 50% of Nepal’s population, the citizenship of these millions of people under the Nepali Constitution is tenuous. Madhesis populate the southern areas of Nepal’s Terai region and comprise a multitude of different, smaller ethnic groups with close cultural and kinship connections to communities across India’s Gangetic Plains. Inter-marriage across the Nepal-Indian border is common, and in part because of their mixed heritage (in addition to other prejudices), the Nepali elite have widely viewed and marginalized the Madhesi populations as not truly ‘Nepali.’ This exclusion was underscored and codified by the promulgation of the 2015
Nepali Constitution (International Crisis Group 2016). According to this Constitution, Nepali citizenship is recognized and granted through patrilineal lines only, regardless of the mother’s birthplace and citizenship. Because intermarriage is so widespread between Nepal’s Madhesi and populations in northern India, the Constitution quickly rendered stateless many millions of Madhesi and marked them as not Nepali citizens. Predictably, this policy sparked widespread outrage, protest, and rioting across the Terai in the fall of 2015, effectively closing Nepal’s southern border with India, suspending the import of fuel and numerous other, essential commodities, paralyzing post-earthquake reconstruction efforts, and creating a uniquely difficult political situation between Kathmandu and Delhi (Rinck and Adhikari 2016).

An explosive collision of road transport, border control, and ethnic identity, the Madhesi protests of 2015 mark an important turning point in geopolitical relations between Nepal, India, and China. The winter of 2015-16 brought political tensions between Kathmandu and Delhi to a point of extreme animosity, and Beijing’s significant humanitarian and relief interventions in post-earthquake Nepal supported a new profile for China across the country. At the height of the Madhesi protests and Nepal’s national fuel emergency, China supplied emergency petroleum from Kyirong to Kathmandu (Murton 2016a). Although this gesture was more symbolic than substantial, it reflects a very real reorientation towards the north for Kathmandu. That is, amidst ongoing political tension between Kathmandu and Delhi, and widespread national sentiments for Nepal to wean itself from resource dependency on (and political influence from) India, Beijing presents a new (and complicated) alternative arrangement for Nepal’s international aid and trade relations. The rapid expansion of north-south highways between Nepal’s northern districts and Chinese Tibet as well as the creation of new Sino-Nepali border regimes is especially indicative of this reorientation.
Today, road development in Nepal marks a key connection between classic developmentalist imaginaries of modern state-making with on-the-ground international infrastructural projects advanced by China’s grand OBOR project. Amongst these development interventions, borders and roads between Nepal and China oscillate between new openings and renewed closures. In order to understand what motivates and undergirds these oscillations, I use analytical frames from mobilities and border studies to form a critical lens with which to view the material, social, and geopolitical effects of trans-border infrastructure development in 21st century Asia. Therefore, before making a closer examination of the infrastructural connections between Nepal and China today, and the entanglements of both mobility and containments these interventions create, I first set the context for this study within the literatures on mobilities and border studies.

Mobility turns

Since the early 2000s, the study of mobilities has gained significant traction across the social sciences. From sociology (Urry 2007) and transportation studies (Sheller and Urry 2004) to anthropology (Clifford 1997) and cultural geography (Cresswell 2012), a mobilities analysis opens space for understanding the ever dynamic relationship between people and things and the places and spaces between and through which they move. Much of the “new mobilities” scholarship (Cresswell and Merriman 2012; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 1999) resonates (albeit problematically) with the borderless world discourse by suggesting the purported liberations of mobilities facilitated by road infrastructures and transport accessibility. As critical scholarship and contemporary politics show, the world today is far from borderless, and thus mobilities research provides an analytical view into the ways that borders are encountered, engaged, and
contested in both material and social ways. While postmodern ideas of territoriality, the
construction of socio-spatial identities, and alleged ‘disappearance’ of borders suggested a
triumph of mobility over borders, ongoing formations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ suggest that borders
continue to play an equal role in the production of new strategies and practices of mobility
(Newman and Paasi 1998). This in a world still (erroneously) perceived (and surely not lived) as
increasingly borderless and “networked” (Castells 2000), the principle of mobilities provides a
lens with which to examine how social relations are established, practiced, and contested in the
contexts of motion and location as well as space and place.

Multiple terms and conceptualizations have been used to define and describe mobilities
such that a standard definition remains hard to identify. Starting as an agenda (Urry 1999),
mobilities has been subsequently identified as a sociological “project,” a “hybrid dialectic”
between sedentarism and nomadism, and as a “mediation between space and place” (Urry 2007).
As a “theory of mobile practices,” mobilities has also been recognized as a “structure of feeling”
established in modern times and accelerated in the 21st century (Thrift 2004: 556). For Cresswell,
whereas place is the social-dynamic equivalent of location, mobility is the social-dynamic
“paradigm” in academic research to provide new directions and analytics for understanding
economic, social, and political relations.

The mobilities paradigm indeed emphasizes that all places are tied into at least thin
networks of connections that stretch beyond each such place and mean that nowhere can
be an ‘island’...It is rather part of a broader theoretical project aimed at going beyond the
imagery of ‘terrains’ as spatially fixed geographical containers for social processes, and
calling into question scalar logics such as local/global as descriptors of regional extent.
(Sheller and Urry 2006: 209)

As with the uneven and disorienting experiences of modernity (Bauman 2000), the
mobility paradigm is also one of great paradox, as it is promoted as a way to understand both
quickening liquidity and density. By attending to this paradox, the new mobilities paradigm “attempts to account for not only the quickening of liquidity within some realms but also the concomitant patterns of concentration that create zones of connectivity, centrality, and empowerment in some cases, and of disconnection, social exclusion, and inaudibility in other cases” (Sheller and Urry 2006: 210). Amidst these different definitions of mobilities, I argue that mobilities remains a productive conceptualization to employ, as it provides an analytical channel through which to approach a group of questions, theories, and methodologies – about places, spaces, and the social relations that produce them – that challenge and disrupt rather than reduce and totalize broader understandings of social processes and material relations.

During the late 1990s, as international flows of capital increasingly “annihilated space by time” and the forces of globalization accelerated time-space compressions (Harvey 2001), social science scholarship turned to a new task at hand – how to make sense of the new network societies (Castells 2000) that enabled people, information, and capital to become hyper-mobile, stateless, and even placeless. Social transformations under capital, urbanization, and uneven development called for new examinations of everyday practice that built upon critiques of Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life* (2011) and Lefebvre’s *Urban Revolution* (2003). Interrogating the ways the mobilities of people and things were coproduced as political and powerful relationships interdependent with place and space, new studies of mobilities analyzed both politics of practice (Cresswell 2013) and studies of traveling cultures (Clifford 1997).

A new mobilities paradigm was promoted in order to problematize sedentarist theories across the social sciences that normalized sedentarism in terms of meaning, stability, and place (Sheller and Urry 2006). Identifying the state of the field as problematically static and fixated on society as in-place, Urry (1999) called for a new “sociology beyond societies” in which society
was conceived as diverse and hybridized, tied together across scales, both transitory across a geometric or expansive space and located in a place (like home). Breaking away from more popular Heideggerean conceptualizations of place as “dwelling” (wohnen), Urry’s project, more specifically, was to reconstruct the “social as society” into the “social as mobility” (1999).

Like space and place, mobilities are also social productions. As a “mediation between space and place” (Urry 2007), the mobilities paradigm is useful for geographic analysis because it supports the interpretation of the ways in which space and place are socially constructed and contested. According to Cresswell, “(social) mobility is a (social) product” (2001: 13), such that mobilities – comprising body, representation, and practice – are also shaped by relations of power. Variable across space and time, the impacts of mobilities can be viewed with respect to people, places, things, and the relationships between them (Cresswell 2001). According to this view of the power dynamics situated in relations between spaces and places, and the ability (or inability) to move between them, a mobilities analysis provides new lenses for examining the ways in which practices (walking, running, driving), places (roads, bridges, airports), and subjects (commuters, tourists, vagabonds) constitute everyday life. More specifically, mobilities provides for imaginations of “how the world could be imagined in-flux: as it is continually made and re-made anew” (Adey 2006: 90).

Following in the tradition of Bauman (2000) and mobile conceptualizations of “liquid modernity,” more materialist consideration of mobilities provides a useful analytical device for understanding contemporary global political economies and the ways in which capitalist relations, trade flows, and social dynamics are established, contested, and reproduced. In this context, over the course of the following chapters I also utilize my mobility-containment framework to examine how capital constantly seeks and requires a spatial fix to overcome
surplus accumulation (Harvey 1992) and in so doing creates both new flows and new blockages. I do this by considering how China’s new international development projects (including the One Belt One Road Initiative) effectively relocate surplus Chinese capital abroad, and through intersections with other international road development programs (such as Nepal’s Strategic Road Network), contribute to the formation of new political and economic relations that translate further into new systems of accumulation, taxation, exclusion, and relocation. Furthermore, I also contribute to the new mobilities paradigm by using infrastructure and border studies to test how social and economic relations are affected by frictions of distance and, moreover, how technologies are used to overcome these frictions and thereby reproduce capital and circulate commodities.

**Border making**

This dissertation combines mobilities thinking (Faulconbridge and Hui 2016) with the ethnographic writing of a border biography (Megoran 2012) to show how infrastructures work to remake social, political, and structural worlds in uneven and overlapping ways. Informed by critical considerations of territory and identity, postmodern and post-structural interpretations of borders (Brunet-Jailly 2011) increasingly provide analyses outside of the top-down, state-centric frameworks that defined early border studies and classical international relations more broadly. In the context of the post-Cold War and economically globalizing world, when borders rapidly opened to transnational flows of capital – and to another, though lesser, extent, people – bottom-up ethnographic and other anthropological approaches (Megoran 2006; Donnan and Wilson 2012; Wilson and Donnan 1998) were used to examine the everyday practices through which borderland populations, national consciousnesses, and institutional borders themselves are co-
constituted (Paasi 1996). However, in view of the converse trajectory of greater global border securitizations through international fencing (Jones 2012), state surveillance (Johnson et al. 2011), and immigration policies in the post-9/11 and War on Terror landscapes – itself a trend increasingly strengthened under new nationalist priorities in both the US and UK – borders must still be considered as fences that continue to separate as well as places where neighbors will always interact (Newman and Paasi 1998). Against essentializing notions of the “borderless” world (Ohmae 1991) and in an effort to connect disparate themes of global deterritorializations and resecuritizations, the writing of critical boundary biographies provides ethnographically informed and textually based understandings of the ways in which borders are social and material assemblages that are in constantly shifting states of materialization, dematerialization, and rematerialization (Megoran 2012). By drawing new attention to the ways in which national identity (Sahlins 1989) and state territorialization (Megoran 2012) are shaped both by and across borders, I utilize both mobilities studies and border studies to help write new cultural histories across the Asian borderlands within shifting 21st century contexts.

Thinking in terms of dynamic processes, institutions, and symbols, borders are constituted as much by everyday or bottom up practices as they are by top down state policies. With the concept of “spatial socialization,” Paasi (1996) shows the ways in which national identity is closely linked to the border, and specifically how the border (and border narratives and border politics) are mobilized and leveraged to define and reinforce notions of national identity through everyday practices of banal nationalism (Billig 1995). Specifically, Paasi (2009) uses examples of “metageographic constructs” such as primary education, school textbooks, patriotic songs, and national hymns to illustrate the ways in which the border is invoked, reinforced, and constitutive of national geographic imaginations through everyday practice. Thus
borders are processes that, like territory (Elden 2013), are always unfolding, routinely contested, and constantly negotiated. The social, political, territorial, and cultural interactions through which a border is envisioned, negotiated, created, and contested calls for a critical border studies that deploys bordering as a conceptual way of thinking about an always unfolding process.

Just as borders themselves are dynamic and not static, border studies as an academic field continues to evolve and take new shape according to changes in global political and theoretical landscapes. The early phase of border studies, generally from the 1910-50s and including both World Wars, was a period of boundary typology where borders were largely defined and classified according to static and deterministic interpretations; borders were the physical and geographical outcomes of political and historical processes (Newman 2006). This approach continued to influence border studies in the post-War period, including through the height of the Cold War during which borders in much of the world became particularly rigid in both institutional and symbolic ways. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a proliferation of new border studies, as new states, social movements, trans-state nationalisms, territorial conflicts, economic restructuring, and histories of national antecedents behind territorial claims led to significant new border work in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. Much of this work also motivated new theorizations of borders as places of interaction rather than monolithic barriers as had been more uncritically accepted during the Cold War period.

Influenced by international economic globalization, border studies’ postmodern period began in the 1990s, characterized by eclectic interest in the diversity of borders as both institutions and symbols, particularly in the context of border identities, border narratives, and border experiences. While the borderless discourse has circulated (and been contested) for two decades, structural and ideological shifts related to 9/11 and the War on Terror as well as, more
recently, Trumpism, Brexit, and international refugee migrations and global biomedical crises have generated profound transformations in borders, mobility, and security for both states and populations worldwide. Amidst neoliberal dynamics of globalization and new reactionary policies that challenge free trade and migratory labor movements and resettlement, it is incumbent upon critical border studies to examine the contrasting themes of international de-bordering and territorial re-securitization in the current political moment.

In recent years, interest in border studies has grown as scholars and policy makers alike reckon with a rapidly transforming international system. Focusing on economic globalization and transformations in technology and communication, the borderless discourse (Ohmae 1995) draws on Castells’s interpretations of a new world characterized by “spaces of flows” rather than “spaces of places” (Castells 1989, 2000). Conversely, as concerns circulate about international terrorism, biomedical epidemics, and trans-state migration, other perspectives point towards state and social responses that reinforce borders. These studies include research on border solidification and surveillance (Amoore in Johnson et al. 2011), and the ideology behind and fixation of new border walls (Jones 2012) and immigration policies. Indeed, the discourse (if not practice) of bordering quickly became a central debate of the 2016 presidential elections in the United States and has remained central to electoral contests and the rise of right-wing nationalist movements across Europe in recent years. Ultimately, as new technologies provide unprecedented mechanisms to create borders (physical, social, biomedical, psychological) where they heretofore did not exist, research on the ways in which borders are “moving” (Mountz in Johnson et al. 2011) generates new understandings of a world that is re-bordering precisely because of its recent and relative borderless-ness.
Although scholars have long theorized borders and aimed to identify key themes of analysis, a grand border theory has remained untenable against shifting conceptual and empirical topics. Paasi (2009) recognizes two key problems with trying to establish a unifying border theory. First, borders are eclectic and unique, singular rather than universal, and thus a one-size fits-all theory is challenged by the innumerable situated knowledges and positions that define each border as distinct. Second, and in regards to theory in general, Paasi argues that because societies are inherently open rather than closed systems, no single theory can sufficiently apply to the innumerable variety of border subjects. Thus, just as borders are highly variable, so a variety of theoretical approaches can and should be used to interpret the social and political dimensions of borders and the processes of bordering. Towards this endeavor, and instead of a grand border theory, Paasi recommends “conceptual invariances” that open up space to analyze the ways in which borders operate territorially (2009). Following Paasi on conceptual invariances, this dissertation looks to the Mustang-Tibet borderlands to see how the production of a particular border reflects broader practices and more universal experiences with bordering as both a social process and the performance of particular, place-based and politicized identities.

Identifying and disaggregating key themes for border studies is also an iterative project. In the late 1990s, Newman and Paasi identified four major themes of boundaries: the disappearance of boundaries; the role of boundaries in the construction of socio-spatial identities; boundary narratives and discourse; and different spatial scales of boundary construction (1998). In the context of the postmodern era of border studies, Newman (2013, 2003) subsequently reinterpreted this list and rearticulated six key themes for border studies, including: demarcation; boundary management; transition zones and borderlands; perceiving the border; boundary opening and removal; and power relations. Thus, rather than fixing and subscribing to a set of
definitive themes or grand theory, border studies instead reflects the subject of its analysis – a
dynamic process of institutional and symbolic meaning that demands critical reinterpretation.

Like landscape itself, borders and boundaries can also be read as text (Duncan 2005).
Ethnographic (Megoran 2012) and historiographic (Sahlins 1989) methods advance interpretive
geographies which illuminate the ways in which borders and bordering are always unfolding
social processes. Although border studies was, for many decades, largely the domain of political
geographers, political scientists, and international relations scholars, more focused attention and
cross-disciplinary approaches to border studies has emerged from across the social sciences
(Megoran 2006; Donnan and Wilson 2012; Wilson and Donnan 1998). Anthropological
approaches – in particular through oral narratives and ethnography – have been especially
productive in generating new interpretations of the connections between identity and subjectivity
with respect to borders and bordering. Nick Megoran’s (2006) ethnographic work in the
Ferghana Valley on the formation and contestation of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, which I
discuss more extensively below, provides a key intervention in political geography and
demonstrates the utility of textured, ethnographic accounts in the production of more nuanced
and grounded understandings of the dynamic nature of political boundaries. Furthermore,
geographical imaginations of national and ethnic identity are frequently generated and negotiated
through everyday practices of education, ceremony, and consumption – key topics of
ethnographic study. Place-based analyses of social relations, cultural consciousness, and
everyday practices in boundary spaces reveal the ways in which institutions of the state are
internalized and reproduced by borderland populations and, conversely, how the symbolism of
borders is essential for the maintenance of the border institution and thus the territoriality of a
state itself.
New critical research in border studies includes interpretations of border performativity as well as new suggestions to “see like a border.” Considering the ubiquity of borders in the 21st century, Rumford argues that analysts must begin to see like a border in order to understand borders beyond classical state contexts (Rumford in Johnson et al. 2011). Going beyond Scott’s notion of “seeing like a state” (Scott 1999), Rumford proposes that “borderwork” – the study of borders at the basis of territorial claims making – must exceed the limitations of the state and instead view borders more comprehensively as “engines of connectivity” (Rumford in Johnson et al. 2011). Moving further outside of conventional top-down and state-centric frameworks, this project argues for more critical border scholarship by starting with localized and grounded experiences of bordering and situating the study on both sides of the Nepal-China border.

There is also a pressing need for critical political geography scholarship to expand its geographical orientations of border studies into a wider Asian context. New border dynamics presented by the creation and expansion of the European Union and border politics and reinforcements in other western contexts, particularly along/across US-Mexico borders, has led to the characterization of these Western border spaces as the latest laboratory for border studies (Paasi 2011). Although extensive border-work attends to the Palestine-Israel conflict, there remains a need for more critical border biographies in Middle Eastern, African, and Asian cases. While anthropologists and historians indeed look to Asian borders in valuable ethnographic ways (Baruah 2005; Gohain 2013; Shneiderman 2015), political geographers can contribute further understandings of the entanglements between Asian borders and geographic imaginaries with the empirical and theoretical tools of place, space, and scale (Cons 2016; Koch 2014; Cons and Sanyal 2013; Jones 2012). The complexities and shifting terrains at borders across Asia – from the histories of colonialism to current economic and forced migrations – call for new
considerations of borders in historical, biographical, and critical terms from the Korean Peninsula to the Caspian Sea.

By thinking of borders and bordering in both institutional and symbolic terms, infrastructure development and border policy across the Nepal-China borderlands reinforces notions of the border as both fence and an interface between neighbors. As trans-border roads into Mustang asymmetrically allow for the flow of material goods but not the widespread movement of people, the Nepal-China border at Mustang-Tibet challenges postmodern interpretations of globalization that frequently (and erroneously) proclaimed the dissolution of borders and nation-states (Donnan and Wilson 1994) and spaces of flows overwhelming spaces of places (Castells 1989) in the flattening of social and economic landscapes. It is this very paradoxical dynamic of conditional mobility in places where borders very much matter that Hirst and Thompson (2009) recognized as the borderless world in fact being “closed to most.” As these tropes of borderlessness, flattening, and (un)evenness have been broadly addressed, widely challenged, and largely debunked, this dissertation instead interrogates borders as political sites of mobility, containment, and resourcefulness that converge through particular configurations of infrastructural production.

In order to bring new attention to areas widely overlooked in the literatures on borders, mobilities, and infrastructures, this project writes a border story across contested and developing spaces of the trans-Himalaya. Revealing the ways in which identities are used to maintain solidarities across borders rather than towards the central state center, this study provides a new interpretation of bordering as social performance and political practice that transcends infrastructural institutions of an outwardly expanding and territorializing state center. I also use my dialectical conceptualization of mobility and containment to bring mobility studies together
with border studies for a grounded analysis of the dynamic and fractal nature of infrastructure development in the Nepal-China borderlands. Finally, by examining the intersections of capitalist circulations and new state institutions at the border, I show how infrastructures of roads, fences, trade networks, and tax systems function together in the accumulation of capital in borderland spaces.

**Mustang in Historical Context**

The Mustang-Tibet borderlands are a trans-Himalayan space where the containments of bordering are conversely challenged by new mobilities facilitated by expansive trans-border infrastructure developments. Under regulations and policy posed by both the Nepali and Chinese states, Mustang has experienced punctuated practices of mobility and containment for the last twenty-five years; however these dynamics themselves build upon more longitudinal experiences with mobility and containment for Mustang since at least the 17th century. Since 1992, when the Government of Nepal first opened Mustang for highly regulated international tourism, the district has received increasing levels of NGO aid, foreign visitors, and Nepali state investment. In contrast to the orientation of these openings towards southern and central Nepal, however, Mustang’s access to Tibet – and the district’s historical orientation to the north – has remained tenuous. Today, communities across Mustang find themselves situated at the crossroads of globally linked, cash-based political economies. New investment and development projects in Mustang, particularly those financed and directed by Chinese interventions, have generated transformative experiences with capitalism and consumption for borderland populations. These experiences are central to both the formation of new subject positions and the territorialization of the Nepali state.
A culturally Tibetan region of Nepal and former Himalayan kingdom in its own right, Mustang has historically maintained crucial and close ties to Tibet (and the religious institutions of Tibetan Buddhism) as well as Nepal (across shifting sovereign regimes from historical monarchies to the current federal republic). For centuries, Mustang was viewed and treated as a peripheral space by the Nepali crown, such that neither infrastructure nor social services reached what was seen from Kathmandu as a marginal borderland. A small Tibetan Buddhist kingdom with strong ties to the powerful, ruling Sakya monastic centers of southern Tibet, Mustang was incorporated into the nascent Nepali state in 1789 through an alliance with Gorkhali unifiers King Prithvi Narayan Shah and then his son, Regent Bahadur Shah (Dhungel 2002). Despite this 18th century integration with the Kathmandu-based Hindu Monarchy of Nepal, Mustang largely maintained its status as a semi-autonomous kingdom from central Nepal rule through numerous cycles of governance, including Shah kings, Rana plutocrats, Panchayat rulers, and early democratic transitions. It is especially important to note that from the 18th century up until recent decades, Mustang’s citizenry was largely neglected by the central state in spite of the Mustang Kingdom’s official incorporation into Nepal.

Nepal first opened its borders to international development in the 1950s, launching a long and uneven experience with modernization characterized by dependency on foreign aid (Hagen 1994; Bista 1991). For Mustang, this transition was marked by experiences of compounded marginality, such that communities across the district continued to be ignored by the state while Kathmandu became the recipient of widespread interventions and investments of international development. This neglect was especially evident in the lack of state services and commitments to infrastructure development in Mustang, characterized by an egregious absence of government support in the sectors of education, public health, and transportation (Thapa 2008).
Although Mustang maintains deep historical and cultural ties to Tibet (Ramble 2008), today the local Lo-ba population of Upper Mustang faces extreme challenges in maintaining traditional borderland connections (Craig 2008).³ For centuries, an official border between Mustang and Tibet hardly existed, and the customary boundary was predicated on the overlapping sovereignty of the Kingdom of Lo and the institution of the powerful Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism (Goldstein 1991). Lo-ba men frequently found brides in Tibet, and one of the great trans-Himalayan salt trade routes ran directly through Mustang, where spices, grains, and textiles from the lowlands of the Indian Subcontinent were traded for wool, tea, and salt from the Tibetan Plateau.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, Mustang became a zone of acute concern for political leadership in both Kathmandu and Beijing. Soon after the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) occupation of Central Tibet in 1951, Tibetan refugees took flight over the China-Nepal borders, and though thousands continued to refugee communities in India, many others remained in Nepal. Due to its close proximity to Tibetan territory, strong kinship and monastic relations with Tibetan populations, and social-physical landscape that extends to the Tibetan Plateau, Mustang quickly became a major settlement area for Tibetan refugees. By 1961, this space of refuge also became the primary base for the CIA-funded Tibetan guerrilla resistance movement (Cowan 2016), Chushi Gangdruk, also known as the Khampa rebellion (McGranahan 2010). Tellingly, Mustang was designated as the base for Chushi Gangdruk (translated as Four Rivers, Six Ranges) not simply for its relative proximity to Tibet, but also due to its periphery from the Nepali state center and the weak rule of the Nepali crown across the district (Shakya 1999).

³ “Lo-ba” is the local and Tibetan term for the “people of Lo” and Lo is the native name for Mustang. While Lo-bas are frequently called “Mustangi” elsewhere in Nepal, in this study I use “Lo-ba” for the ethnically indigenous members of Lo/Mustang society and use “Mustangi” as a more general identifier when making more collective reference to residents of the district, a community that also includes Nepalis, ethnic Tibetans, and others.
While the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1951 placed unprecedented limitations on cross-border movements for both Lo-bas and Tibetans, trans-border mobilities were further curtailed by Beijing and Kathmandu in the 1960s.

Although the Mustang-Tibet border was historically characterized by relative fluidity, beginning in the 1960s, it also became a prime site of regional geopolitical intrigue. Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1951, Indian check-posts were established across the length of the Nepal-China borderlands in order to monitor the activities of the People’s Liberation Army in southern Tibet (Rose 1971). Although there were no major Nepali or Chinese state structures at the border, by 1960 the area featured one of seventeen Indian check-posts that spanned the entire Sino-Nepal boundary zone (Rose 1971; Cowan 2016). Observations of PLA activities were collected at these check-posts and intelligence was then relayed via coded messages to the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu and onwards to Indian security offices in Delhi (Cowan 2015). By the end of the 1960s, however, Nepali institutions largely replaced these Indian check-posts.

Controversy generated by the Tibetan resistance movement ultimately led to relative closure and more enforced marginalization of Mustang for more than two decades. As a result of the Chushi Gangdruk struggle and subsequent pressure from the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu following the surrender, arrest, and assassination of Chushi Gangdruk leaders (of which there were two major, rival factions (McGranahan 2010)), Mustang became a geopolitically sensitive and officially restricted space. A translation of political conflict across the Mustang-Tibet border into a formal Nepali state policy of isolation, Mustang remained closed to the outside world until 1992. This closure was maintained through formal state policy and practice, such that foreign
travel was forbidden to the upper, northern reaches of Mustang and state services like education, sanitation, and infrastructure works were hardly provided.

Although modest numbers of urban and lowland Nepalis paid visits to Mustang between the 1960s and 1990s, trans-border livelihoods based on agriculture, pastoralism, and trade were intermittently disrupted and restored, resulting in the suspension of a historical trade corridor and curtailment of long-standing kinship practices between Mustang and Tibet. In the 1980s, in concert with political transformations in China under Deng Xiaoping, allowances were made for limited travel across the Mustang-Tibet border. This enabled both Lo-bas and Tibetans to renew (or at least renegotiate) historical trans-border pastoralism, trade practices, and kinship relations that had been suspended since the 1960s. Social and economic practices based on trans-border relations continued through the 1990s and into the 2000s, a period during which the level of foot traffic in and through Mustang also grew significantly once the Government of Nepal opened the district to national tourism in 1992. However, since the early 2000s, travel over the Mustang-Tibet border has again been curtailed, a process most visible with the Chinese construction of a border fence in 1999. By strictly managing the movement into Tibet for Nepali populations with distinct Tibetan cultural attributes – such as the Lo-bas of Mustang – Beijing has facilitated a virtual closure on historical Lo-ba-Tibetan marriage practices, access to highland grasslands, and routine trans-border trade relations.

Mustang is also one of Nepal’s least densely populated districts and despite new road and trade systems, agro-pastoralism remains the primary economic livelihood for the region. According to the 2011 National Census of Nepal, Mustang District has recorded negative population growth since 2005 (Statistics 2012), a key outcome of pervasive outmigration to Kathmandu, India, and the United States (Childs et al. 2014). With a population of just 13,452
distributed across 3,573 square miles, Mustang’s population density is only 3.76 persons per sq. km; average household size is 4.01, and 64% of the population relies on firewood or dung for cooking fuel (Statistics 2012). The population is distributed across several dozen villages in three main regions: Lo Tsho Dun (northernmost seven villages of Lo); Baragaon (middle twelve villages); and Panchgaon (lower five villages) and the contemporary district capital is Jomsom. However, the historical political capital and enduring cultural center is Lo Monthang, seat of the (late) King of Lo and home to the major monasteries, temples, and schools for the district.

Belying its low population density and relative remoteness, Mustang is a place of outsize interest and concern to political leaders in Kathmandu and Beijing. The district is geopolitically important and ethnically sensitive as well as a destination for growing the national tourism economy, expanding international trade, and a site of potential uranium extraction and other natural resource endowments (Bhattarai 2016). In concert with road and other infrastructure developments, consumer spaces in Mustang have also become a spatial fix for Chinese surplus capital.

As I discuss more extensively in Chapters 4 and 5, while small, Nepal presents an expedient and proximate site for a Chinese spatial fix. Capital constantly requires an outlet for reinvestment to maintain its circulation, and a spatial fix provides this outlet by redirecting and relocating capital towards new targets. On the one hand, overall Chinese investment in Nepal – $8.3 billion committed by Chinese firms at the 2017 Nepal Investment Summit (Parajuli 2017) – may be a relatively small portion of Beijing’s broader agenda to relocate massive amounts of capital; for example, Beijing is currently estimated to hold at least $3.2 trillion in foreign reserves (Khattach 2016) and so efforts to resolve larger crises of over-accumulation clearly exceed Nepal’s capacity for absorption. On the other hand (and as I examine more closely in
later chapters), the scale of Chinese investment and development funding to Nepal is massive in the Nepali context. This is evidenced, if only in part, by the fact that China has topped FDI to Nepal since 2014 and Beijing launched its largest-ever international humanitarian effort in response to the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal and pledged $750 million to earthquake reconstruction (Murton 2016a). Moreover, current Chinese investment and loans to Nepal for infrastructures such as roads, hydropower, and other energy and resource development programs as articulated in the 2016 Nepal-China Joint Statement and 2016 Transit Trade Treaty continue to make headlines in Kathmandu and fuel national imaginaries and visions of a modern, integrated, and electrified Nepali state (Jaiswal 2017). As Xi Jinping’s hallmark One Belt One Road Initiative constitutes an unparalleled global development agenda, bilateral visions of incorporating Nepal’s Strategic Road Network within larger OBOR initiatives underscores Nepal’s position amidst China’s trans-Himalayan spatial fix – an expedient production of new markets and infrastructural programs as a means to move money, goods, and concrete into new spaces of development beyond China’s borders.

Amidst wider development projects in Asia, today across Mustang and elsewhere in Nepal, road developments and other infrastructural interventions of border making, market expansion, bureaucratic institutionalization, and foreign aid packages reflect the material and territorial connections of place making, state formation and geopolitical power. New roads facilitate the distribution of Chinese products and generate new spaces for capital circulation and international development between Tibet and Mustang. Rapidly expanding flows of capital embedded in Chinese commodities, accelerated by remittance economies, and reinvested in tourist lodges and village shops together motivate a territorialization of Nepali state space that functions to control new consumer spaces. At the same time, populations across Mustang are
repositioned as taxable consumers and as new types of citizen subjects of an outwardly territorializing Nepali state, while China itself gains extra-territorial power to address its own security concerns across its borders. In the following chapters, I will examine how these dynamics of mobility and containment fit together, and the ways in which particular infrastructures intersect with and configure the material and social relations that define new experiences with development across the trans-Himalaya.
Chapter 2
Roads
“*If you are poor, the road makes you poorer*”

Roads, mobilities, and geographical imaginaries in Mustang

One summer morning, sitting in the private family quarters of the oldest guesthouse in Kagbeni, Nepal, I asked my host, Drolma how new road systems affect everyday life in Mustang district today. Drolma, sipping her morning tea, told me matter of factly, “nobody stops and stays anymore!” Wanting to know more, I asked how could this be, as Kagbeni is strategically located at the intersection of two major rivers, a sacred *pitha* place for Hindu pilgrims, a key junction of the region’s most popular trekking route, and the base for government check-posts and a conservation-area office that supervises tourism into the district’s northern restricted zone of Upper Mustang. Moreover, *kag* means ‘stop’ in Tibetan, further reflecting the fact that Kagbeni has long been a point of rest for regional travelers.

While visitors to Kagbeni come from all walks of life and travel according to various agendas, Drolma’s point transcends demographic differences. In contrast to past years, when locals and foreigners alike would routinely overnight in Kagbeni, new road networks to the north, south, and east of Kagbeni have all but eliminated the need to break one’s journey in town. Nearby Drolma’s guesthouse, a small shopowner, Jigme, echoed his neighbor, emphasizing that almost no Lo-bas stop in Kagbeni these days. Underscoring their point and in contrast to years before the road, international visitors tend to stop in Kagbeni mainly to complete bureaucratic formalities such as registering entry to Upper Mustang with disaffected police and national park officers. Although the town remains home to no fewer than two-dozen guesthouses, restaurants,
and supply stores, and foreigners traveling to Upper Mustang are required to stop in order to get special trekking permits stamped at the check-post before moving north or south, Dolma and Jigme’s comments signal a key way in which new transport networks are transforming longstanding social and cultural practices of moving more slowly and deliberately up and down the Kali Gandaki Valley.

Map 2.1 Map of Mustang District

Beyond the conspicuous way that motorcycles, jeeps, and buses facilitate faster modes of travel and obviate the need for routine rest stops, Drolma and Jigme also reveal more nuanced, cultural dimensions of social change in Mustang affected by new road infrastructures that
increasingly connect Nepal’s northern borderland districts with both China and central Nepal. Along with new mobility practices, these roads also contribute to the constitution of wider infrastructural and bureaucratic systems that place new terms of social, cultural, and economic containment on Mustang’s populations, and at very variegated levels.

In this chapter, I look at road developments in Mustang in order to see the ways in which a state takes shape without actually looking at the state itself. While critical research (Blaikie et al. 1976, 1977, 1980) argues against the ‘benefits for all’ logic of road development promoted in early World Bank projects and national modernization programs across Nepal (Gurung 1969), both rural and urban road development continues to be prioritized in Kathmandu as a project of national modernization and international integration (Rankin et al. 2017; Department of Roads 2014). While my primary intention here is not to add to the already substantial literature that critiques development assumptions about the ‘flattening’ outcomes of transportation-based accessibility and how mobility leads to economic opportunity, international road construction initiatives (World Bank 2006) and national integration programs (Ministry of Transportation 2016) continue to suggest an expedient link between rural road development, social mobility, and state modernity for Nepal. By illustrating how road projects invariably introduce new dynamics of both mobility and containment for populations in the Nepal-China borderlands, I shed light on the dubiousness of such modernization claims and instead show how motorized transportation networks and the (im)mobilities they facilitate both perpetuate uneven development and advance state making in borderland spaces.

In this chapter, I examine three cultural, infrastructural, and socio-economic aspects of road development in Mustang that demonstrate how roads and new mobility practices shape state formations, social relations, and geographical imaginaries in the trans-Himalaya. Building on my
mobility-containment framework, I analyze: 1) Nepal’s Strategic Road Network as a national development agenda to advance biktas; 2) new mobility patterns that disrupt cultural practices of trans-Himalayan nyetsang social systems and reorient geographical imaginaries; and 3) the ways in which road access and exclusion reinscribe rather than flatten social hierarchies and class divisions throughout Mustang. From these analyses, I argue that the development of road infrastructure in Mustang has facilitated new configurations of mobility and containment at local, regional, and trans-national levels. Linking development to place, I also show that these mobilities and containments both disrupt and reinforce socio-cultural legacies and geographical imaginaries formed as a result of Mustang’s location along trans-Himalayan trade routes.

*Infrastructure matters: Social and scalar intersections of roads, mobilities, and geopolitics*

Infrastructures constitute a dialectical synthesis of mobility and containment by both allowing and inhibiting the movement of things through space. Roads undergird and enable a range of material processes, such as marketplace exchanges, consumption behaviors, and bureaucratic interventions. Thinking of roads as an entanglement of material practices and social relations, this chapter examines the ways in which mobility and containment are experienced across scale from localized everyday life to broader state making agendas to international development programs in the Nepal-China borderlands.

Theoretical and conceptual work on mobilities (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 1999; Cresswell and Merriman 2012; Cresswell 2001; Cresswell 2012) and infrastructure (Larkin 2013; P. Harvey and Knox 2015; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2015; Anand 2011; Latour 1993) informs my analysis on the ways in which roads – like other assemblages of infrastructures (Larkin 2013) – help shape social and territorial space (Harris 2013). In order to advance critical
conversations on mobilities, I take a granular and localized approach to analyze the materialities that help constitute relationships between expanding transport infrastructures, mobility practices, and geographical imaginaries amidst wider processes of state territorialization (Jessop, Brenner, and Jones 2008) in Nepal. Using Cresswell’s consideration of mobilities as the embodiments and “entanglement of movement, representation, and practice” (2010: 17), this chapter utilizes field-based, ethnographic research on borderland lives (Megoran 2012) to illustrate how roads, borders, and mobilities work together in the reconfiguration of particular geographic imaginaries. As Megoran has shown with respect to borders, I examine the ways in which infrastructures and the (im)mobilities they produce both shape and reshape trans-Himalayan political geographic imaginaries, “or the way in which people experience, conceive of, or desire a particular configuration of the relationship between space, ethnicity, nation, and political community” (Megoran 2006: 623). To do this, I use a case study of everyday experiences with roads in Mustang to draw a bigger picture of more widespread and uneven impacts of infrastructural developments on social and cultural life across the Nepal-China borderlands. Finally, I use this consideration to draw attention to and extrapolate on potentially similar and pending experiences facing communities across Asia under China’s One Belt One Road Initiative.

Recent geographic literature has called for more critical engagement between transportation literature and mobilities studies (Cresswell 2010; Kwan and Schwanen 2016; Cidell and Lechtenberg 2016). While research on transportation geography predominately examines interactions at macro-societal levels and through technological lenses, a mobilities approach – with particular emphasis on the social interaction of people, movement, and place – brings politics to bear on the key themes of transportation studies, such as roads and rails, modes of transport, and networks of travel. Cidell and Lechtenberg argue that transportation is a
political project and that transportation studies should be engaged as such (2016). “Although transportation collapses space and time by altering the positionality of places relative to each other, it does so unevenly, shaping those places in the process” (Cidell and Lechtenberg 2016: 259). In this dissertation, I answer the call for more spatially critical and materially based studies of transportation and mobility by analyzing road developments between places and across scales in a mountain borderland increasingly connected to multiple state centers. Specifically, I add to the argument that infrastructure developments are not merely technological projects with flattening outcomes but rather material practices that reshape social relations and, in so doing, generate uneven experiences with disruptive cultural and political implications.

According to Harvey and Knox, roads are productive for analysis because of “what they can tell us about how infrastructural relations simultaneously make national territories, international corridors, regional circuits, and specific localities” (2015: 25). That is, road studies help to bridge macro-level analyses of international and national infrastructural connectivity with micro-level insights about the transformations to everyday life experienced at village, household, and bodily levels on and off new roadways. For looking at roads, Larkin’s analyses of infrastructure further reveal the ways in which technologies converge into specific systems and how these systems shape fundamental dimensions of life. As “matter that enable the movement of other matter,” things like roads, rails, and communication technologies “comprise the architecture of circulations…and they generate the ambient environment of everyday life” (Larkin 2013: 328-29). While road infrastructures enable the movement of people and goods, they also control those movements, and thus they help rewrite relations between such things, as well as between a state and its populations. Thus, the development of roads and the socio-
economic dynamics and bureaucratic responses they set in motion allow for a particular view of and into the state without looking at the state center itself.

Mobilities are both advanced and constrained by the distribution of transportation infrastructures – such as roads – and mobility practices are fundamental to wider social and logistical networks. Especially in spaces of development, where technologies are liberally promoted for their ability to “improve” life (Li 2007), the broader social and political infrastructures that these technologies build become fetishized objects that obscure the actual social relations upon which they are constructed (Larkin 2013). Larkin’s insights politicize infrastructural systems and thereby problematize the popular discourse behind road development and bikas – material and social development – in Nepal. For example, Nepal’s Strategic Road Network is vigorously promoted as one of the country’s great new avenues to economic prosperity and human development (Post 2016a). Despite the challenges inherent in the construction and maintenance of trans-Himalayan road systems, the Mustang roads remain key components of a national agenda that identifies infrastructure development as both a basis and driver of a more “modern Nepal” (Transportation 2016). However, the complex ways in which new transportation infrastructures affect local communities into and through which they pass (or do not pass) remains a critically missing piece of popular development discourse in Nepal (Campbell 2010). Before making a closer examination of the new Mustang roads, however, I review the history of road development in Nepal and argue that it is indivisible from wider projects of modernization and state formation across the country.
2.1 A Brief History of Road Building as State Making in Nepal

Since the late 19th century, road development has been promised and pursued as a national project of state making across Nepal. From early efforts at national integration under Nepal’s monarchy in the 1800s to post-War developmentalist paradigms that prioritized roads as paths to modernity, road construction has remained both a structure and a symbol of Nepal’s development imaginary (Gurung 1969; Chambers 1983). While international donors gave generously towards road and other infrastructural developments throughout the mid- to late-20th century (Hagen 1984; Rose 1971; Fujikura 2013), it is well documented that road developments fell well short of providing the structural basis for economic growth, national integration, and political stability across Nepal (Blaikie et al. 1976, 1977, 1980). Despite billions of dollars in international aid for infrastructural investments, Nepal’s hill and mountain villages remain largely disconnected from the Kathmandu center and, as is especially evident in rural regions, the country has some of the lowest road densities in the world (Rankin et al. 2017). Nevertheless, road projects and other infrastructural interventions continue to be envisioned and articulated as paths to prosperity across the country, and not just in urban environments but very much in the hills and mountains as well. For Nepal, “as an iconic symbol of modernity, roads continue to hold out the promise of connectivity, political power, economic growth, and cultural status” (Rankin et al. 2017: 43).

Implementing roads is a highly complex process, and the engineering challenges of road construction in Nepal are exceeded perhaps only by the social disruptions that they also create. On the one hand, it is clear that road developments are not socially flattening but, rather, produce and reproduce particular terrains of social unevenness (Campbell 2010). On the other hand, while compelling evidence show a wide gap between the aspirations for and actual benefits of
social transformation and economic opportunity that roads are purported to deliver, (Blaikie et al. 1977), road development continues to be promoted and prioritized as a path to realize the dream of modernity and national integration that has long eluded Nepal. Dating back to mid-century programs led by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank that emphasized the centrality of road construction for development in Nepal (Gurung 1969; World Bank 2006), roads are still positioned front and center in Nepal’s more recent plans for national infrastructural connectivity (Ministry of Transportation 2016). For example, in Winter 2017 a new vision for this national infrastructural development priority was widely promoted as a 21st century ‘Game Changer’ for Nepal in the national press.

*Figure 2.1 1st Issue of ‘Game Changer’ report on Nepal’s national infrastructure agenda*

Source: Republica 2017
On the basis of extensive archival research, Rankin et al. point out that in Nepal, “not a single development project has been issued that does not accord priority to road building, and on average transportation and communication infrastructure has comprised 24 percent of the national budget over the thirteen plans that have been issued since 1956” (2017: 43). For example, Kathmandu’s commitment to infrastructure development as a physical and symbolic project of modernization, economic growth, and (inter)national integration is reflected most recently in the 2016 Five Year Plan for Transportation Infrastructure Development (Ministry of Transportation 2016). And as I discuss further below, Nepal’s Strategic Road Network comprises one of the country’s most ambitious infrastructure projects yet, envisioned as a new network of trans-border highways to connect Nepal’s northern borderlands with both Chinese road systems across Tibet and the central valleys and lower plains of Nepal (Department of Roads 2014). While Nepal’s current Thirteenth Five Year Plan (2013/14-2017/18) devotes over 20% of its budget to transportation (and communication) infrastructure, popular media outlets throughout Kathmandu regularly articulate and disseminate a certain Nepali infrastructural imaginary to wider audiences. As a result of these ongoing trends, and as I argue throughout this dissertation, road development maintains a certain political and discursive power in Nepal that continues to reshape social relations between the state and its citizens as well as within and across trans-Himalayan borderland communities.

In Nepal as elsewhere, road developments bridge social and spatial scales but are always political projects with uneven outcomes (Campbell 2013; Harvey and Knox 2015; Mostowlansky 2017; Wilson 2004; Flower 2004; Kreutzmann 1991; Ispahani 1989). That is, road constructions are inherently political processes that function to territorialize space across scales for distinct, but often conflicting, governmental, economic, and community interests. It is thus useful to look at
transportation infrastructure because “a road invites us to explore its constitutive relations: the materials, the finance arrangements, the politics, the dreams of progress, the design...and the force of contingent events that routinely disrupt the best laid out plans” (Harvey in Venkatesan et al. 2016: 2-3).

In a recent study of roads and modernity along the Pamir Highway in Tajikistan, Till Mostowlansky (2017) approaches the highway as a ‘field’ and ‘social landscape’ with powerful material connections and disruptions. Asking how populations along the Pamir Highway “negotiate, incorporate, modify, and reject different ‘projects’ of modernity,” (2017: xx), and looking at road effects through the intersecting lenses of identity, Islam, and the state, Mostowlansky shows how these sites “are closely intertwined by means of local ‘projects’ of modernity through which people along the road situate themselves amid marginalization, political processes, religious reform, and economic change” (2017: 13). The road is thus revealed as a social landscape that cements particular social relations but that is also a territorializing entity. Thus, “the Pamir Highway also gives us, like many other roads, insights into ‘modern state formation’ (Harvey and Knox 2008: 80) and highlights the importance of the material base that goes hand in hand with cultural change” (Mostowlansky 2017: 7).

Drawing on my conceptual framework of mobility and containment, I also look to roads in Nepal to understand the ways in which infrastructure projects open and close social and political spaces, and how this often happens in very unexpected ways. Others’ previous work on road development in Nepal (Rankin et al. 2017; Campbell 2010, 2013; Blaikie et al. 1976, 1977, 1983) is particularly valuable for my study of the wider processes of territorialization that have been set in motion by a small road project in Mustang. Approaching periodic cycles of road developments as “regimes of territorialization,” Rankin et al.’s recent archival work begins with
construction of the first motorable roads pursued during Nepal’s autocratic Rana regime (1846-1951) “to trace how road building articulates state building, geopolitical dynamics, and place-based social relations” (2017: 44).

As a territorial and bureaucratic approach to the infrastructural, “regimes of territorialization” Wilson (2004) provides an analytical framework to connect roads with political processes of state formation, social progress, and landscape control. While “regimes” signal a “centralized political organization” that constitutes a political field of contestation, “territorialization” references the processes by which land becomes terrain for specific political purposes under particular rationalities of control. “Thus roads can be interpreted as a space of governing where there is a gap between desired governance outcomes of planners and rulers and the actual messy, conflict-ridden landscapes of the ‘territorialized’ (Rankin et al. 2017: 45). In their study, Rankin et al. (2017) use regimes of territoriality to draw a temporal typology of development regimes in Nepal: ‘managing coloniality’ (1846-1950), ‘integrating the nation’ (1951-1970), and ‘building economy’ (1970-1990). While they suggest a fourth typology, ‘balancing sustainability, struggle, and democracy’ (1990-present) that might bring Nepal’s ongoing developmentalist trajectory up to the current moment, they stop short of this extension and instead “conclude by reflecting on how the historical record offers a perspective on the current and future regimes of territorialization” (2017: 46).

Without reviewing their excellent archaeology of road development in Nepal, I do employ the authors’ analytical framework on roads as projects and processes of territorialization to examine several critical periods in Nepal’s national development trajectory. It is important to make a brief consideration of these moments as turning points that nevertheless show how previous projects continue to fuel the frenzy of road building across the country today – and this
despite the reality that many past projects did not meet their desired outcomes. In both discursive and material terms, the evolution of road development programs comprise a hybrid trajectory of transportation infrastructure and modernist thinking in Nepal that helps to contextualize my further analysis of road development across the Mustang-Tibet borderlands. This is especially important because since the 1950s, large-scale road projects in Nepal have also been critical junctures of geopolitical intersection, including investments and interventions from both Beijing in Delhi as well as international donors from Washington, Moscow, London, Tokyo, Geneva, and elsewhere.

Roads have played a central role in the modernization of Nepal since the early 20th century but the earliest road projects were conducted as much to enforce closure and exclusion as a means to provide access and mobility. While the Rana regime constructed the first motorable roads in the Kathmandu Valley as early as the 1920s, their projects were largely ostentatious ones, meant to facilitate the driving of vehicles that only the Ranas could own and in a city that had no road connections to anywhere else. Images of low-caste porters carrying luxury European vehicles through the Terai valleys and over the hills to Kathmandu provide an apt picture of the “selective exclusion” and symbolic power that roads and vehicles enabled (Rankin et al. 2017).

In an effort to thwart the prospect of colonialism creeping in from British India, the xenophobic Rana oligarchy deliberated refused the construction of road linkages outside of the Kathmandu Valley. As Mark Liechty has noted, somewhat counter-intuitively, it “was a matter of state policy to ‘maintain’ the road in as bad a condition as possible” (1997: 32-33). And yet, in contrast to this enforced containment, the regime did manage a wide network of foot and horse paths throughout the country that enabled the circulation of an early postal system as well as (and more importantly for) the collection of taxes and expropriation of resources and labor by feudal
landlords from their agrarian and oppressed subjects. Under the Ranas, “roads thus served as a means of communicating acts of rule, transporting ruling and military entourages, controlling public goods, and enacting political repression (Rankin et al. 2017: 52).

Figure 2.2 Nepali porters carrying a Mercedes from Indian border to Kathmandu, 1940

Source: Photo available online (Pinterest 2017)

Major political transformations across Asia in the 1940s and 1950s marked a turning point in Nepal’s experience with national and international development. Following Indian independence (1947) and the Communist Revolution in China (1949), by 1950 a newly organized Nepali Congress Party (organized largely in India) collaborated with the Royal Palace to oust the Rana oligarchy in 1951 (Rose 1971). In 1958, the Regional Transportation Office was established to forge a “tripartite road-building operation” comprising assistance from India, the USA, and Nepal (Rankin et al. 2017: 56). However, unstable democratic rule enabled Nepal’s King Mahendra to claim executive power and seize control in a political coup in 1960. The newly formed Panchayat regime included an active monarchy and a nationalist development apparatus (Rose 1971), and road construction soon assumed a central place in the vision of
making a modern, bureaucratic state. King Mahendra eloquently summarized his commitment to and faith in roads as the path to a modern Nepal: “The stronger our roads and trails become, the more the fresh breeze of progress will circulate without hindrance across our country leading to the healthy growth of all its parts” (HMG 2020: 7). And far more than mere poetics, Mahendra consistently exhibited deft diplomacy and remarkable maneuvering to transform Cold War geopolitical ideologies into physical road connections across Nepal, routinely playing Delhi and Beijing off of one another to get his road projects done in the south, center, and north of the country (Rose 1971).

Subscription to modernization theories and development paradigms of the mid-century led to regional planning frameworks that prioritized the place of roads for a more integrated and economically robust Nepal. And no one individual was more instrumental to this process than Harka Gurung. Trained with a PhD in Geography from the University of Edinburgh, Gurung’s dissertation conducted a “regional study” of Pokhara firmly situated within the traditions of British functional Geography. Appointed as the Vice Chairman of the National Planning Commission in 1968, Gurung was tasked with applying regional planning principles to the development of Nepal, “a coordinated approach to land-use management, infrastructure development, and settlement growth that would reflect Nepal’s complex topography, ecology, and demographics” (Rankin et al. 2017: 64). “The first attempt to incorporate a spatial dimension in national development” (Gurung 2005: 3), Gurung advanced policies with the belief that:

[An] important aspect of a spatial framework relates to transport infrastructure, which determines the future pattern of development. The north-south road linkages have now become more extended...and these have been superseded by the East-West Highway with considerable change in the arterial route system. Yet, there is a lack of economic articulation based on such a vast infrastructural investment. In spatial planning terms, the East-West Highway should be developed as the spine of national development, with the north-south roads as a series of ribs for lateral diffusion (Gurung 2005: 34).
This model of regional planning development soon evolved into a national plan to integrate the country with roads through a “fish-bone pattern” formed by north-south “rib” corridors connected with the “spine” of the East-West Highway. Based on the national administrative structure of fourteen zones and seventy-five districts compartmentalized into five development regions, this fish-bone network was meant to create and facilitate significant economic growth and rural social uplift and improvement through road connectivity.

Map 2.2 Map of Nepal’s early growth axes and now reflected as Strategic Road Network routes

Source: Pitamber 2007 (from Rankin et al. 2017)

Beginning even before Harka Gurung’s highly (and still) influential 1969 national report Regional Development and Planning for Nepal (Gurung 1969) that clearly outlined a national modernist agenda built squarely on road connectivity and directed toward large, multinational donors like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, road construction has been leveraged through Kathmandu as a platform of state-making as well as a vector of geopolitical power. Soon after the establishment of Nepal’s first Ministry of Planning and Development in 1951, the National Planning Commission instituted the first of its continuously running Soviet-style five-
year plans. Similar nationally planning systems were used both in India and China, and even thirteen rounds later, Nepal’s five-year plans continue to direct massive allocations of resources and development priorities to road construction. More importantly still, this mid-century development moment also coincided with Nepal’s first encounter with international diplomacy, as Nepal joined the United Nations in 1955 and a US Embassy was opened in Kathmandu 1959. Alongside these new diplomatic engagements, concomitant aid packages soon started to flow.

Implemented one decade apart in the 1950-60s, Nepal’s first road projects situated the country within wider technical and diplomatic dynamics of Cold War geopolitics. A brief review of road projects from that period shows that road infrastructure development has long been a technique of both connectivity and soft power in Kathmandu with respect to Delhi and Beijing. Between 1955-1956, the Indian Army built Nepal’s first major road with international connections, the Tribhuvan Raj Marg, which links Kathmandu with Raxaul on the Indian border. One decade later (and soon after resolution and formal demarcation on the Sino-Nepal border, as I discuss more extensively in Chapter 3), from 1961-1968, the Government of China built the Arniko (Raj Marg)-Friendship Highway, linking Kathmandu with China at the Tibetan border of Kodari-Zhangmu. In addition to roads built by its neighbors, Nepal also opened up to wider international aid for infrastructure development. This aid-infrastructural entanglement is an ongoing process that can also be traced to the construction of the Mahendra Raj Marg (East-West Highway) and that, from 1961-1982, used multiple configurations of donor aid and Nepali investment to link the country’s eastern and western districts and border crossings across the Chure foothills. Building on Rankin et al.’s (2017) argument that this phase of road development was foremost about ‘integrating the nation,’ I also suggest that the international crossings and linkages that these roads established in a heightened Cold War period of the 1960-70s illustrate
how road development has long been (and continues to be) both a state-making project and a geopolitical tool. As these and more recent cases of road development in Nepal indicate, national state projects of improvement and competitive geopolitical interests from outside cannot be divorced from one another and instead converge and are advanced through road construction.

Following the critical and retrospective 1968 World Bank report that challenged (and began to transform the practices of) two decades of development assumptions (World Bank 1968), large-scale transport-agricultural planning was superseded in the 1970s by new development logics that emphasized small-scale social investments focused on poverty alleviation and needs-based assessments. In Nepal, place-based strategies such as the Small Area Development Programs remained focused on rural development but largely shifted priorities from roads and major infrastructural investments to more localized agricultural projects and smaller-scale production. While road development programs did continue apace throughout this period – such as the iconic, Swiss-funded Lamosanghu-Jiri road – the purported promises of economic growth that roads were supposed to deliver were significantly challenged by empirically rich and theoretically critical political economic research on the unevenness of development. No single report did more for (or against) trends in road development in Nepal than The Effects of Roads in West Central Nepal, conducted and published by the Overseas Research Group based at the University of East Anglia and published in 1976 (Blaikie et al. 1976). By pointing to the ways in which centrally planned road projects transform existing transport networks, displace and relocate populations, accelerate rural-urban migration, encourage speculation and inflate land values in road-proximate locations, and create new political economic hierarchies, Blaikie et al.’s report revealed, at a fundamental level, “how
development opportunities like roads create enhanced opportunity for those with capital to invest, but can lead to loss of livelihood for those who do not” (Rankin et al. 2017: 72).

Challenging central beliefs in the ability of road projects to positively impact economic development and social mobility, the group’s neo-Marxist critique of the social disruptions and political complexities caused by rural road development in Nepal coincided with a paradigm shift in development practice towards the small and local rather than the grand and national.¹ In addition to opening key views into national development imaginaries and social disruptions, regional geopolitics can also be read through a study of road developments in Nepal. That is, *The Effects of Roads in West Central Nepal* and subsequent volumes did more than disrupt national road development paradigms in Nepal and create lasting debate on the place and role of roads in a modernizing Nepal. They also brought critical attention to the ways in which roads are and enable particular practices of politics.

While contestations about where a road does (and does not) go continue to inspire heated debates across rural Nepal, allowing and disallowing access to roads is also represented in struggles for resistance in urban centers. During the Maoist War, few operations in Kathmandu drew the quotidian ire of the urban population more effectively than regular *bandhas*, or road closure strikes. In the early to mid-2000s, these strikes reached a zenith of occurrence that eventually led to the paralysis of Kathmandu for multiple days per week. Called by Maoist cadres, student radicals, bus and truck syndicates, and ultimately any organized body with a frustrated grudge, the frequency of *bandhas* came to reflect the abject failure of the Nepali state to maintain a functioning capital city amidst more widespread calls for political rights and social change. Because those who violated the strikes risked property damage if not bodily harm,

¹ Whether this shift was incidental or causally determined by the report remains debated today. See Pitamber Sharma (2007).
bandhas were generally observed even when the platforms were vague and the purposes uncertain. A site for claims making and the staging of protests, the control of roads directly enables and disables both mobilities and containments. As such, recent patterns in urban road politics also reflect a shift in scale and place across Nepal. Like rural roads being built in the hills and mountains, bandhas also represent the ways in which operable roads are an essential component and mode of action – and disruption – for a functional state in a modern Nepal.

Map 2.3 Nepal’s Strategic Road Network (Mustang-Tibet Road is at map center)

2.2 Expanding Nepal’s Road Networks to China

As discussed above, road infrastructure development is a fundamental project of national state making and the impacts of roads are both heightened and complicated in borderland
regions. The point of departure for this analysis is the local and community-led construction of a small, trans-border road between Upper Mustang, Nepal and the Tibet Autonomous Region, China. One of only three operational linkages across the central Himalayas, the Tibet-Mustang road has become a key component of the Government of Nepal’s much larger Strategic Road Network (SRN) (Department of Roads 2014). A national infrastructure development scheme that aims to better connect Nepal with China’s expansive One Belt One Road Initiative, the SRN is an ambitious project that includes the construction of up to eight trans-border roads between northern Nepal and China’s Tibet Autonomous Region within the next 5-10 years. The SRN is central to the Government of Nepal’s national thinking on infrastructure as a key route to development and modernity (Ministry of Transportation 2016). Towards the realization of this national vision, a main objective of the infrastructural upgrade and expansion to the Mustang-Tibet road is to augment as soon as possible the only two Sino-Nepal trade corridors, the currently closed Arniko-Friendship Highway and the newly opened Kyirong-Rasuwa road.

Following Harvey and Knox’s recent research on roads in the Peruvian highlands, it is useful to consider the agenda of Nepal’s Strategic Road Network and ongoing infrastructure development as a convergence of “imaginative and material practices” that bring into being new material and social relations between communities in Nepal as well as Nepali citizens and their international neighbors (2015: 6). The ways in which Nepal’s nationalist development visions prioritize international infrastructure connectivity and the expansion of trade and tourism with China was clearly conveyed to me by the Government of Nepal’s Consul General to China, Hari Bashyal. Speaking at the Nepali Consulate in Lhasa, Tibet, Mr. Bashyal expressed the urgency and necessity under which Nepal’s state leadership identifies infrastructure as the best route to bring economic growth and international connectivity to Nepal. Having told me that the Nepali
Consulate in Lhasa grants more visas to international travelers (including both recreational tourists and business people) than any other Nepali Embassy or Consulate in the world, Mr. Bashyal then suggested that the establishment of new road links between Tibet and Nepal could help to rewrite relations between the two countries. He expressed this outlook with respect to his particular domains – visa policies and travel regulations. True to his prediction, in December 2015, the Government of Nepal waived visa fees and eased travel requirements for Chinese tourists to Nepal (Prasain 2015). Since 2013 (and with the exception of India, for whom visas are not required for travel to Nepal), Chinese tourists have constituted the top, annual source of foreign visitors to Nepal (Ministry of Culture and Aviation 2016). While air routes between Kathmandu and multiple Chinese cities have also expanded in recent years, new road infrastructures are fundamental to thickening economic, political, and social relations between Nepal and China (Daily 2016).

As material and political extensions of vast Chinese road networks, Nepal’s new borderland road projects also provide an expedient site of investment and capital relocation to relieve China’s crisis of over-accumulation and massive surplus capital. As a transport-technological spatial fix, Nepal’s Strategic Road Network looks to be increasingly integrated into – and advanced by the financial and political power behind – Beijing’s far more massive One Belt One Road Initiative (Bushal 2017). As OBOR presents a strategic mechanism to both relocate and reproduce capital, spaces of trans-Himalayan road development in Nepal are likely to assume unprecedented positions as sites of new capital accumulation beyond China’s borders. As I discuss further in Chapter 4, this dynamic – or the border corridor as resource and both mode and means of accumulation – is reflected by the growing connections between international roads, new border bureaucracies, and expanding trade and transport networks.
between Nepal and China that are increasingly concentrated in Mustang and other trans-Himalayan borderlands.

In order to situate the development of the Mustang road within broader contexts of trans-border infrastructure between Nepal and China, it is necessary to briefly review the history and status of the two other roads that connect Kathmandu with Chinese Tibet. Predecessors to the Mustang-Tibet road (F042), these are the Arniko-Friendship Highway (H03) and the Kyirong-Rasuwa road (F021). Rather than an overt comparison, however, this review is made to direct attention towards the larger trajectory of Sino-Nepali relations and the place of infrastructure development – and especially that of the Mustang road – on the rapidly ascending and accelerating curve of engagement and investment between China and Nepal. After examining these road networks, I then discuss how trans-border infrastructure and state interventions shape mobility practices, social relations, and geographical imaginaries across the Mustang-Tibet borderlands.

**Arniko-Friendship Highway**

The Arniko-Friendship Highway (H03), running between Kathmandu and the Sino-Nepal border at Kodari-Zhangmu (also known colloquially as Tatopani in Nepal and Kasa or Dram in China/Tibet) was the first and, up until the 2015 earthquakes, primary trans-border corridor between China and Nepal. Opened in the 1960s with the Chinese construction of the Arniko Highway (Nepal) and Friendship Highway (China) and linked by the China-Nepal Friendship Bridge, this trans-border highway traditionally handled more than 80 percent of direct transnational trade between China and Nepal (however, a greater overall quantity of goods continues to come from China to Nepal via sea routes to Kolkata). Connecting the border town
of Kodari with Kathmandu and built by Chinese capital, engineering, and labor, Nepal’s Arniko-Friendship Highway represents one of Nepal’s earliest national modernization projects based on infrastructure development.

The history of development of the Arniko-Friendship Highway can be traced to a key period in Sino-Nepal international relations. The Nepali section – or the Arniko Raj Marg – is in many ways a material and ideological extension of Chinese Highway G318, which itself runs nearly 5,400 kilometers from Shanghai to Lhasa and then onward to the China-Nepal border at Zhangmu. Completed in the 1960s, Nepal’s Arniko Raj Marg/Friendship Highway was an early and modern example of what I call Sino-Nepali “road diplomacy,” an infrastructural and discursive symbol that was up until 2014 the only motor road to directly connect central Nepal with China. Just one month before the codification of the 1961 Boundary Treaty, on September 5, 1961, His Majesty’s Government of Nepal and the Government of the People’s Republic of China concluded a breakthrough Protocol to the Agreement on Economic Aid between China and Nepal (Jain 1981). Through an explicit expression of “friendship” focused on technical expertise and infrastructure development, this Protocol on Economic Aid led directly to the China-Nepal Highway Construction Agreement of October 15, 1961 and the development of the China-Nepal Arniko-Friendship Highway (Jain 1981). These policies and programs exhibit, from 1961 until today, a powerful relationship between Sino-Nepal border management, international investment, and road construction across trans-Himalayan spaces.

A critical artery for Nepali trade imports and international tourism, the Arniko Highway assumes a significant place in both Nepali and Chinese international development imaginaries. For Nepal, the Arniko-Friendship Highway signifies both early acceptance of and ongoing dependence upon foreign development interventions (Fujikura 2013; Hagen 1994) as well as both infrastructural
and economic connections with China. Today, it is precisely upon a particularly fetishized vision of infrastructural expansionism that Nepali political leaders as well as international donors continue to stake claims of modernization, competence, and legitimacy (Bose 2016). For China, the Arniko-Friendship Highway also represents the early successes of the Chinese Community Party’s state-led development programs. Just several kilometers uphill from the Friendship Bridge at the China-Nepal border, a distinct ideology of socialist labor and state building is vividly displayed alongside the Arniko-Friendship Highway in Zhangmu’s Martyrs Cemetery, a large and overgrown arboreal memorial located just above the winding and congested hillside bazaar and dedicated to the hundreds of Chinese workers killed during construction of the Friendship Highway.

*Figure 2.3* Zhangmu Martyrs’ Cemetery commemorating Chinese highway construction
The Arniko Highway’s key function to maintain Sino-Nepali export-import economies is belied by its many environmental vulnerabilities. For example, frequent landslides along the road routinely suspend trade between Kathmandu and Lhasa and disrupt the flow of goods and people from China into Nepal. While an emergency of this type was experienced in 2014 as a result of the Sindhupalchok landslides and subsequent lake formation and flood risk, a more severe crisis evolved in the wake of the 2015 Nepal earthquakes. Specifically, the May 12 earthquake and subsequent aftershocks – with an epicenter just 18 km south of Tatopani – devastated both the Nepali and Chinese border towns and, moreover, damaged the Friendship Bridge so extensively (Dhangal 2015) that as of this writing (July 2017), the bridge remains closed to all but minor foot and motorcycle traffic. Although the Chinese military has overlaid the damaged expanse with a temporary Bailey bridge, the scope of damage is so severe that the existing bridge must be entirely dismantled before a suitable replacement can be constructed. While Nepal is now well beyond the two-year anniversary of the April-May 2015 earthquakes, the border crossing at
Kodari-Zhangmu remains closed to significant trade, and traffic along the Arniko-Friendship highway functions domestically but trans-border travel is still effectively suspended. In response to this protracted crisis of physical and economic vulnerability, both Nepali and Chinese authorities have shifted transport priorities to Kyirong-Rasuwa as the most expedient alternative route to resume and maintain trans-Himalayan transport and commerce (Report 2016c).

**Kyirong-Rasuwa Road**

The Kyirong-Rasuwa road (F021) is the most recent, major trans-border route to open for trade and tourist traffic between China and Nepal and it became a major artery for Chinese earthquake relief and humanitarian aid to Nepal in 2015. Unofficially opened for traffic in August 2014 to relieve trade emergencies caused by the monsoonal landslides in Sindhupalchok and subsequent closure of the Arniko-Friendship Highway, it was just five months before the spring 2015 earthquakes that Kyirong-Rasuwa was officially inaugurated as Nepal and China’s newest border crossing. Building on an illustrious history of national defense when Nepal’s Royal forces stationed at the Rasuwaghadi fort protected Nepal against Tibetan invasions of the 18-19th centuries (Lim 2008), this route is projected to soon become the largest single corridor of transnational trade across the trans-Himalaya (Cowan 2013). Reflecting the previous construction of the Arniko-Friendship Highway as a bilateral effort between China and Nepal, significant road expansion along the Kyirong-Rasuwa road has commenced in an international, collaborative effort of capital, labor, and engineering and is slated to include a new paved highway up to 30 meters wide between Rasuwa and Galchi (Ghimire 2016).

Chinese capital and construction firms have played a unique and crucial role in the development of trans-border roads, particularly as components of mutually supporting transport-
hydropower projects across Rasuwa. Between 2010 and 2012, the Hongji Group, a Lhasa-based construction firm backed by the Chinese provincial government in Tibet as well as Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu, led construction of the final 20 km segment of the Kyirong-Rasuwa road from the China-Nepal border to the major town of Syabrubesi (Hongji 2014). No small feat of engineering, this relatively short connection in turn established a new and complete road linkage from the Chinese border to Kathmandu via Nepal’s Rasuwa, Nuwakot, and Dhading districts. Framed as a gift to the Nepalese government and the Nepali people of Rasuwa, this project also represents a further opening of economic possibilities between China and South Asia via a newly modernized trans-Himalayan trade route.

Representing what I have previously identified as an emerging “power corridor” between China and Nepal (Murton, Lord, and Beazley 2016), the Kyirong-Rasuwa road increases access not only to major, new hydropower projects but also valuable mineral deposits in the Nepal borderlands to numerous Chinese contractors and developers. For example, in addition to serving regional hydropower facilities, the Chinese-built Kyirong-Rasuwa road now provides a direct infrastructural link from Kyirong (within Tibet) to the large Somdang mine (in Rasuwa), a rich site of lead and zinc reserves where prospecting licenses are now held by several Chinese firms (Department of Mines 2016). Under the ambitious objective that China’s rail network will reach Kyirong and the Tibet-Nepal borderlands by 2020 (Nyaichyai 2016), the significance of the Kyirong-Rasuwa road as a vector for international resource extraction will further increase its utility, forging a crucial connection of less than 50 kilometers between mine to train. As with development in Mustang, this regional convergence of infrastructure, investment, and extraction in the Kyirong-Rasuwa borderlands makes Chinese development in Rasuwa increasingly resemble development in Tibet, where the ‘gift of development’ (Yeh 2013) deploys
infrastructure to consolidate state space into territory, particularly for resource exploitation and energy production.

In addition to road and hydropower developments, the new Kyirong-Rasuwa road also represents a significant point of economic inflection and collaborative state making between China and Nepal. Modestly sized Nepali customs and border facilities at Rasuwaghadi officially opened in late 2014, only to be destroyed by the 2015 earthquakes. Building on larger development plans that include China’s US$200 million domestic dry port in Kyirong, pre-earthquake commitments from Beijing included the finance and construction of a second major dry port and enhanced customs facilities for the Government of Nepal in Timure. While it remains uncertain to what extent the Rasuwaghadi-side of the border facilities will be rebuilt, rather than relocated, significant progress on the development of the new dry port at Timure commenced in early 2016 in order to maintain and expand overland trans-border trade between China and Nepal (Samiti 2016). As I discuss more extensively in Chapter 5 in the context of Chinese humanitarian aid to Nepal, the Kyirong-Rasuwa road also assumed a new degree of prominence during Nepal’s post-earthquake emergencies, opening as an unprecedented channel for both disaster relief aid and energy fuel provisions provided by the Chinese state government to the people of Nepal (Report 2016c). Moreover, because the Arniko-Friendship Highway remains closed to international traffic and trade, recent forecasts on infrastructure development from Kathmandu indicate that the Kyirong-Rasuwa road will continue to be prioritized as the primary trade corridor between China and Nepal (Ghimire 2016), with the Mustang-Tibet road identified as the newest viable and hopeful secondary route between the two countries (Gautam 2017).
Mustang-Tibet Road

The Mustang-Tibet road over the Kora La pass and between the villages of Nyechung (Mustang) and Likse (Tibet) is one of the oldest formal border crossings in the Tibet-Himalaya region and for centuries served as a central artery of the trans-Himalayan salt trade. Today, this road is the northern extension of Nepal road F042, the Dhaulagiri-Kaligandaki “highway” that runs north from the town of Beni and through Jomsom, the modern capital of Mustang District, up to Lo Monthang, the historical cultural and political center of Mustang. Despite Mustang’s key location on one of the most important trade routes between Tibet and Nepal, and between China and India more broadly, modern vehicular roads are extremely new to Mustang. As discussed in the Introduction, complex geopolitics between Nepal, China, and India have strongly affected both domestic and international mobilities and border policies across Mustang, and Tibetan exile and resistance movements as well as Chinese and Indian counter-intelligence activities complicated the development of transportation infrastructure for many decades. Today, however, new roads in Mustang are helping to rewrite trans-Himalayan borderland biographies and are increasingly promoted in the Nepali press as new avenues of connection between Nepal and China and for future Sino-Indian trade throughputs (Gautam 2017).

Modernizing road projects in Mustang bridge local, national, and regional scales, and four dimensions of the trans-border road construction process bear close attention: location, production, connection, and circulation. Beginning in the mid-20th century, residents and leaders from Mustang appealed to the Nepali government to build the district a road, to better connect their communities with the rest of the country and to facilitate improved access to commerce, education, medicine, and urban opportunities. The road was long promised but never delivered (Thapa 2008). Eventually, Mustang communities took matters into their own hands, constructing
a road in the early 2000s between the capital, Lo Monthang, and the Nepal-China border at the Kora La via Nyechung. Rather than an international intervention, it was in fact a self-organized operation – funded by the district’s village development committees (VDCs) – that built the first road within Mustang, and that to the Kora La at the Tibetan border.

According to one of the Mustang’s highest ranking political leaders, over the course of several years between 2000-2004, each VDC from the upper villages of Mustang contributed annual dues of 1-5 lakh Nepali Rupees (~$1000-5000 per annum) towards the construction of the road. Labor for the project was sourced both from within the district and from outside. Although many informants reported that this was a local, grassroots effort, others indicated that financial support came from the Government of Nepal, international donors (such as the Asian Development Bank), and even the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China to Nepal. Despite conflicting reports about the financier and the labor involved, it is key to note that the first road to/from Mustang connected the district not with some place else in central Nepal, but instead to China via southern Tibet. A matter of both expediency and ethnicity, the Mustang road relieved frictions of distance to the Kora La and markets in Chinese Tibet, its construction was shorter and easier than the creation of a south-bound road to Jomsom, and the road followed and largely reproduced historical routes of trade and social connection between communities in Upper Mustang and the southern Tibet.

As a result of this project and the acceleration of motorized traffic, systems and scales of trade and mobility between Mustang and Tibet quickly began to change, as have state bureaucracies and other institutions assigned to manage and contain the movements of people and commodities across the borderlands. For example, the Mustang-Tibet road’s contribution to the broader Strategic Road Network depends upon its connection with central Nepal via a newer
network of roads that link Lo Monthang with the district capital of Jomsom as well as Jomsom with the large central cities of Beni and Pokhara. While this Kali Gandaki road network between Lo Monthang and Pokhara remains punctuated by broken sections due to monsoonal landslides, missing bridges, and general obstacles to maintenance, it is now possible for both people and goods to make in just two days what twenty years ago was a two week journey.

Betraying Mustang’s more recent history of government-imposed containment, new transport infrastructures have produced new mobility practices that significantly contribute to shifting social and economic relations for Mustang’s populations with both China and Nepal. New speeds and courses of travel have in turn generated a new current of commodity flows into Mustang, particularly evidenced by reductions in the travel times and concomitant increases in trade volumes. Rather than a fortnight trip by mule to carry rice from central Nepal to northern Mustang, it is now possible—and far quicker and cheaper—to transport such foodstuffs by truck. Moreover, it is not only Nepali goods that now make this trip but large quantities of Chinese things as well: factory-made carpets and teacups, plastic shoes and electric appliances. As I discuss more extensively in Chapter 4 in the context of shipping costs and consumption practices, the roads from both Pokhara and Tibet have accelerated a new flood of commercially manufactured (and inorganic waste-producing) consumables into the mountain-region marketplaces and domestic spaces of Mustang.

For decades, conversations have also circulated around the development of the Mustang-Tibet road as a major route for trade and tourism between China and Nepal. In addition to its potential as a prime corridor for the delivery of Chinese and Tibetan goods to the Nepali marketplace, travel through Mustang has long been part of the trans-Himalayan pilgrimage and tourist imaginary. Especially for Hindu pilgrims of Nepali and Indian descent, Mustang provides
the most direct and propitious avenue for *yatra* (Hindu pilgrimage) to the major destinations of Muktinath (in Nepal) as well as Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar (in Tibet) via Mustang’s remote sacred lake, Damodharkunda. In order to facilitate the growth of tourist and trade traffic through the district, new plans for border institutions have evolved in turn, including expanded customs and quarantine facilities, as well as administrative immigration desks for international travelers. In view of these objectives, a preliminary Nepali feasibility study commenced in November 2015 and brought members of the Nepali Parliament, local Lo-ba leaders, and Kathmandu-based development contractors to the Kora La border crossing (Report 2016b). In addition to this high-level political visit, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) initiated an Environmental Impact Assessment to evaluate how major infrastructure development will affect Mustang’s highly fragile ecosystem and cultural environment. Although Chinese contractors completed an upgrade of the road to the Mustang border on the Tibet side in 2016 (Tripathi 2016), it remains doubtful that the expansion of the Mustang roads on the Nepal side will be anything less than a long, slow, and highly politicized construction process, consistent with other infrastructural projects across Nepal (Report 2016a). Nevertheless, it has become clear that social and physical landscapes of the Mustang-Tibet borderlands are on track for major infrastructural interventions.

Despite great expectations that roads can and will bring unprecedented levels of prosperity to Mustang, the physical viability of the Mustang roads remain marginal and they suffer from disconnection and routine breakage. For example, the river crossing at the “Gate of Mustang” (below the town of Tsele) remains a major obstacle to traffic flows. This chokepoint requires the offloading and transfer of cargo between vehicles or, alternatively, the precarious crossing of the Kali Gandaki River by jeeps and lorries, but only during low-water periods before
the rainy season. This obstacle is but one reason why the Mustang road is most heavily traveled during the late-winter and early-spring months, when the Kali Gandaki gorge serves as a winter road and trucks are able to ford the river more safely.

*Figure 2.4 Hazards of crossing Kali Gandaki River without bridges between Tsele and Chuktsang*

![Picture of hazards of crossing Kali Gandaki River without bridges between Tsele and Chuktsang](image)

Source: Photo by author (April 2015)

Compounding this tenuous accessibility, however, are the perennial challenges of road maintenance exacerbated by Mustang’s rugged mountain geography and position on the edge of South Asia’s monsoonal climate systems. Landslides are frequent during the spring and summer months, particularly in the lower reaches of the Mustang roads between Jomson and Beni/Pokhara. But even in the higher reaches, where Mustang’s landscapes are situated in the rain shadow of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri Himalaya, the earth remains unstable and the roads particularly prone to closure. This physical reality reflects the ways that roads not only generate new conditions of mobility and containment in socio-spatial contexts but that the roads themselves are affected by environmental and climatic conditions that can also be considered natural forms of mobility and containment.
Thinking roads across space and scale

Having situated road construction in Mustang within broader domestic and international trans-Himalayan infrastructure development programs, it is useful to think about the Mustang road alongside Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox’s consideration of road developments as both national enchantments (2012) of bikas and cross-scalar processes of territorialized state-making (2015). Specifically, road projects in Mustang demonstrate an interconnection of scales and the interdependence of local, national, regional, and international visions and agendas. First, it was a local grassroots initiative rather than a national development scheme that, after decades of demands, finally produced the first road in Mustang, specifically between the Tibet border and Mustang’s cultural and historical center of Lo Monthang. Second, this initial road connected Mustang not with Nepal but with China. Third, the road rapidly accelerated the import of Chinese goods from Tibet into Mustang. And fourth, the road consequently set the groundwork...
for significant additional road and infrastructure projects between Mustang and the rest of Nepal according to the Strategic Road Network, financed and undertaken by agents of the Nepali and Chinese states as well as other international donors.

National and international investments and development projects in Mustang build upon and advance one another in scalar and fractal configurations. Enabled by new road accessibility, some recent projects include solar electricity installations in Lo Monthang sponsored by the Embassy of China, bridge-building at Tsele sponsored by the Embassy of India, primary schools developed by Italian NGOs, and monastery and temple restorations underwritten by American NGOs. More importantly, and as I discuss further in the following chapters, road development has also initiated unprecedented Nepali state making projects and bureaucratic interventions including commitments to a new border regime through the stationing of border commissioners, army barracks, customs houses, and dry port facilities (Report 2016b; Mu 2014). Looking backwards from today, it was in fact the economic interests of a local project with regional cultural connections that ultimately set in motion the current and expanding presence of Nepali state apparatuses and other foreign development interventions in a trans-Himalayan borderland.

Both optimistic support and strong opposition have defined the public response to the Mustang-Tibet road expansion. In addition to the Consular General in Lhasa, Kathmandu-based media outlets as well as the Ministry of Tourism and Chamber of Commerce are increasingly bullish about increasing both the size and the services of Highway F042 (Post 2016b). This includes expanding the size of the road and making it operational year-round as well as increasing transport services for both tourism traffic and trans-border commerce. However, local constituents in Mustang express more calculated reservations about the impacts of the road. At the upper-end of the social hierarchy, several members of Mustang’s elite families and other
leading entrepreneurs – namely those who participate in the tourism industry – told me that lodge and vehicle owners are nervous about declining business as foreign trekkers routinely complain about the roads. At the other end of the economic spectrum, and in the face of recent normalizations of road transport over more historical pedestrian and caravan travel, farmers and smaller business owners without significant capital assets or the cash to afford jeep tickets are even more anxious about the roads. As Jigme expressed to me in Kagbeni, and as I explore more extensively below, many in Mustang feel that “if you are poor, the road makes you poorer.”

2.3 Whither the Nyetsang and Changing Geographical Imaginaries

Mustang is a place with historically mobile practices based on trade and pastoralism and social engagements in the region have long relied upon reciprocal relationships that support long-distance travel, such as the nyetsang tradition. Nyetsang is a fictive kin and extra-familial social network that established and maintained reciprocal support systems for travelers to receive food and lodging from non-kin relations when moving across trans-Himalayan landscapes. A social practice predicated on common cultural ground and maintained across distant mountain spaces, nyetsang represents and maintains a lived experience of trans-Himalayan mobility. From village-level social commitments to broader networks of the trans-Himalayan salt trade, nyetsang comprises unique socio-spatial mobility practices that are situated in and across place(s). Moreover, as a cornerstone of inter-village social relations as well as a marker of ethnic identity, nyetsang mobility practices help produce the cultural spaces that connect to trans-Himalayan geographical imaginaries. That is, Lo-bas practice nyetsang in Mustang, as do members of neighboring highland districts in the Nepal-China borderlands as well as Tibetans on the other side of the border; conversely, lowland Nepalis, or rongba, do not participate in nyetsang networks, nor do Han Chinese in Tibet. Focusing on the spatial situated-ness that undergirds
social relations, in this chapter I examine how the Mustang road reshapes nyetsang practices as a form of geographical imaginary in the trans-Himalaya.

Building upon David Harvey’s work on geographical imaginations as a distinct form of “spatial consciousness” that goes beyond aesthetic experience (2006), I use geographical imaginaries to refer to the ways in which place informs group identity and how individuals comprising a group share practices that distinguish them as being from and of a particular place. A place-based positionality but also cultural affinity, geographical imaginations are constituted by a distinct spatial consciousness that shapes processes of identification as well as differentiation. As with social and cultural ‘context,’ geographical imaginaries can and do have overlapping attributes and the geographical imaginary of one group is not necessarily mutually exclusive of that of another group. For example, across much of the Nepal Himalaya, many ethnic groups from proximate regions such as Humla, Dolpo, Mustang/Lo, and Manang are culturally Tibetan and politically Nepali but also uniquely Humli, Dolpopa, Lo-ba, etc.\(^2\) Not unlike the widely known Sherpas of the Khumbu region, these ethnic groups have much in common with respect to religion, food, dress, and language, and yet different groups maintain distinct cultural practices – such as liturgical performances or ceremonial attire – that set one group apart from another.

Conversations about geographical imaginaries explore the ways in which social life is embedded in and an expression of place, space, and landscape (Gregory 2009). By examining and emphasizing the ontological and positional, critical attention to geographical imaginaries can

\(^2\) Historically, these groups were consolidated in the South Asian identity imaginary and caste system as “Bhotia.” “Bhot” is derived from the Tibetan word for Tibet, böd. While Bhotia provides a measure of utility for capturing and describing a certain trans-Himalayan identity, I avoid using Bhotia because of its more recent derogatory connotations and to avoid slippages of homogeneity. Instead, I use the more geographically situated but still expansive “trans-Himalayan” for collective group identities and identify smaller sub-groups according to their place names, e.g. Lo-ba, Dolpopa, Humli, Sherpa.
disrupt tropes of flatness that erroneously homogenize ethnically and economically diverse communities (Phelps, Bunnell, and Miller 2011). From working class cosmopolitanism in urban London (Devadason 2010) to the situated moral economies of free trade food systems (Goodman 2004) to the rise of new political parties and electoral preferences (Agnew 1997), the study of geographical imaginaries reveals the textured and uneven landscapes that define and distinguish populations amidst other social, cultural, economic, and political influences. Reflecting the ways in which spatial consciousness informs both ethnic identity and social relations, Mustang’s geographical imaginaries are oriented by trans-Himalayan places and shared cultural practices of the region.

The connection between place and geographical imaginary is also scalar. That is, Humli, Dolpopa, and Lo-ba geographical imaginaries are first located and conditioned by natal spaces such as one’s village at sub-district levels in western Humla, Inner Dolpo, or Upper Mustang. Second, the modern-day district that defines one’s state citizenship in Nepal further informs that imaginary, as officially Humli, Dolpopa, Lo-ba/Mustangi, etc. Moreover, group members oriented by these geographical imaginaries routinely recognize a broader, collective identity and practice that is distinctly trans-Himalayan. For example, while unique Tawang geographical imaginaries of the eastern Himalaya politicize ethnic identity in Arunachal Pradesh (Gohain 2013) and longstanding mobile practices shape distinct socio-cultural relations in the western Himalayan areas of Ladakh (Rizvi 2004), both Arunachalis and Ladakhis share and recognize a common trans-Himalayan cultural ground. An example of ethnic identification that crosses international borders, and especially with respect to communities inhabiting the mountain landscapes of High Asia (Shneiderman 2010; Megoran 2006), members of Arunachali, Ladakhi, Dolpopa, and Lo-ba ethnic groups are also in many ways culturally (but not necessarily
politically) Tibetan. Resonating with popular tropes that identify Ladakh as “Little Tibet,” numerous Lo-ba informants in Mustang explained how their forefathers’ generations were inextricably entwined with Tibet through religion, kinship, economies, and other social ways. One shopkeeper in Ghemi village told me, “For my father and grandfather, going to Tibet was just like going to Nepal. What we needed was there (tea, salt, butter, and meat). Many men found brides there and the monks went to study. Mustang and Tibet were connected. We do the same things and we think the same ways.”

A variety of practices characterize trans-Himalayan communities as culturally Tibetan and establish a basis for regional geographical imaginaries. These include (but are not limited to) a spoken language based on a dialect of the Tibetan language, Tibetan Buddhist (or Bon-po) religious practice and monastic traditions (Ramble 2008), incorporation of and preferences for Tibetan medicine (sowa rigpa) (Craig 2012), and customary dress featuring Tibetan style aprons (panggdan) and tunics (chuba) (Harris 2012). In fact, the panggdan has long been a signifier of Tibetan-ness, as the colors and widths of its stripes as well as the ways in which the apron is worn at the front and/or back of the waist signals one’s natal home or place of residence. In dietary terms, the heavy consumption of both salted butter tea and roasted barley flour, or tsampa, is also a key marker of trans-Himalayan identity. Indeed, many ethnically Tibetan and trans-Himalayan peoples calls themselves tsampa-eaters as quickly as they refer (somewhat disparagingly) to lowlanders as ronba. And while salted tea is not necessarily popular across the globe, it is a drink of choice from highland northeast India to the mountain villages of Ladakh and even Baltistan in the high valleys of Pakistan’s Karakoram (where Balti is also a Tibetan dialect). Furthermore, for populations of Nepal’s Himalayan borderlands, a visit to
Kathmandu is literally said as “going to Nepal” (*pe-yul tro-gi re*).³ Livelihood practices based on transhumance and semi-pastoralism alongside seasonal, high elevation agriculture are also commonplace (Bauer 2010), as is widespread horsemanship and animal husbandry of sheep and goats as well as yaks and dzos (yak-cow crossbreeds). Similar to how mother tongues across the region are derived from Tibetan while the languages and dialects are not always mutually intelligible, members of various trans-Himalayan communities share many cultural characteristics in common, and yet they remain distinct from one another. The trans-Himalayan geographical imaginary comprises both these similarities and differences.

Mustang’s location along a historical trade corridor and on the northern slope of the Great Himalayan Divide has positioned its people and landscape as culturally and geographically unique. While Mustang is in many ways Tibetan, since the Kingdom of Lo’s incorporation into the Nepali state in the 18th century, the region has also been distinctly Nepali in political and economic terms through citizenship and taxation. These dual but interconnected orientations in Mustang – both north to Tibet and south to Nepal – have shaped unique geographical imaginations – or socio-spatial consciousnesses – that are expressed through particular socio-spatial practices and relations, such as *nyetsang*, trans-border kinship with Tibet, and Nepali surnames across the district. That is, the performance of localized but regionally congruent practices and relations represent the Mustang geographical imaginary as distinctly Lo-ba while also being both (but not entirely) Tibetan and Nepali. Voiced through Mustang’s regional dialect of Tibetan, displayed in unique painting styles of Buddhist iconography, articulated with localized surnames of Bista, Gurung, and Lama,⁴ and performed through everyday acts of

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³ I have transliterated Tibetan phrases phonetically rather according to the Wylie system, as the latter is particularly challenging for non-Tibetan speakers.

⁴ Importantly, Mustang’s noble family Bistas are not Hindu, although they do have a Nepali-Hinducized name given to the group by the Nepal monarchy. Furthermore, despite having a common surname, Mustang’s Gurungs are
agricultural labor that correspond to local social hierarchies, the cultural practices and social
traditions of Mustang’s geographical imaginary maintain what it is to be Lo-ba (or Mustangi) as opposed to Nepali or Tibetan.

Shared geographical imaginaries between communities in Mustang with those across the border in Tibet are cultural but also relationally political. On the one hand, Lo-bas look to the Dalai Lama for religious guidance, but they do not grant political allegiance to him or the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. On the other hand, Lo-bas routinely express their sympathetic commitments to the Tibetan cause of autonomy under Chinese rule, if not outright independence. For example, on multiple occasions in Mustang, when I asked about social connections with Tibet and how Chinese development interventions may have changed those relationships, several informants echoed what one elder trader from Ghilling told me: “Tibetans and us, we’re the same (people). We share many traditions, and we are worried about China in Nepal because we know what China did to Tibet. We are like Tibet, and Chushi Gangdruk was here. That is why China is interested in Mustang. We want to stay connected to Tibet but we do not want to be part of China.” While this contemporary political solidarity is a natural outcome of more longitudinal social relations between Mustang and Tibet, many Lo-bas with whom I spoke identified the break-up of longstanding trans-border socio-spatial and cultural practices to be a direct consequence and everyday experience of modernizing Nepali and Chinese states.

As Mostowlansky discovered with respect to roads and modernity in the Tajik Pamir (2017), the construction of a road (and consequently also a new border regime) between Mustang

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unrelated to the Nepali Gurung ethnic group from the middle-hill region. Like the Bistas, Mustang’s Gurungs also adopted the surname as a result of incorporation into the Nepali monarchy in the 18th century. However, Fürer-Haimendorf (1988) identifies this name transition to have begun with the Thakali traders of Thak before its adoption by communities in Lo, who themselves took it on to set their group apart from the upper-caste/class Bistas. Ultimately, the application of these Nepali surnames also enabled the Nepali crown to extend a system of caste hierarchy and social stratification beyond the Hindu regions of Nepal and into the Buddhist borderlands.
and Tibet has generated conditions of modernity in the trans-Himalayan borderland. Characterized both by mobility and containment, these conditions are shifting geographical imaginaries across the region. As a result of widespread out-migration, international relocation, and global consumer practices, many youth across Mustang increasingly look to Kathmandu – and even New York City\(^5\) – for cultural inspiration and social connection, all the while still identifying as members of a trans-Himalayan highland community. At the annual soccer tournament between villages from Upper Mustang, teenagers with freshly coiffed hairstyles share images on their smart phones about the latest trends and gifts from their family members in Queens, NY. While the continuation of marriages between princes of the royal house of Mustang and brides from central Tibet maintain a direct cultural link and socio-spatial practice across the Nepal-China border, more common and everyday practices such as *nyetsang* are falling apart. Although Tibetan and Lo-ba cultural affinities and practices transcend borders and other modern-day institutions of the state, community members also indicate that profound transformations are happening to socio-spatial consciousness as a consequence of changes to everyday life. These changes are being accelerated by new road infrastructures and the mobilities and containments that they generate.

A key social structure for the sparsely populated environments of High Asia, *nyetsang* is a socio-spatial practice that is constitutive of geographical imaginaries across Mustang. For centuries across the Mustang-Tibet borderlands, long-distance travel depended on the socio-spatial institution of *nyetsang*. In villages throughout the region, an individual would depend upon his/her *nyetsang* to ease the burden of travel and provide local knowledge alongside a bed

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\(^5\) New York City is now where the largest community of Mustang’s population resides outside of Nepal. This New York-based population is so large that virtually every family in Mustang has a relative in Queens, NY and when a visitor to Mustang inquires “where are all the 18-30 year old men and women,” a typical answer is “they are in New York!” A local impact of this migration pattern is that Mustang now maintains a robust remittance economy sourced not from Gulf countries or South East Asia, as in the rest of Nepal, but instead from New York City.
and meals. Because traditional modes of travel – by foot or horse – also required the adequate feeding of pack animals, nyetsang also took responsibility for provisioning the fodder or grazing land necessary for travelers’ livestock. A widespread cultural practice and socio-spatial institution common across the trans-Himalaya, the nyetsang tradition helps to uphold social connections throughout Mustang’s villages and furthermore between Mustang’s households and those in Tibet as well as neighboring districts of highland Nepal, such as Dolpo and Manang.

Upon the advent of road travel in Mustang, nyetsang systems began to collapse, and with them many other longstanding social structures shaped by geographical imaginaries have shifted. A Lo-ba friend named Tenzing (who now lives in New York City but with whom I traveled in Mustang in 2015) told me, “the system is in the process of vanishing – because of the development of infrastructures, (but also because) people started to not disturb their nyetsang. Just like nyetsang, now so many things are changing.” Today, travel throughout much of Mustang is made almost entirely by motorized vehicle. As the pace of travel has increased, the regularity of visits with nyetsang has inversely decreased. A consequence of this is that families within a nyetsang relationship have lost familiarity with one another. As Tenzing further explained to me, “lacking of going to each other’s villages often makes the excuses of getting distance (i.e. becoming separated).” That is, people do not know one another like they used to; road travel is expedient and “nobody stops and stays anymore.” Instead of encouraging one to call upon his or her nyetsang during the course of travel, this unfamiliarity instead dissuades participation in and reproduction of the social network.

There are many reasons why the nyetsang system started to collapse with the arrival of vehicular travel in Mustang. At the ground level, grass fodder is no longer sought as the primary fuel for travel, but rather gasoline. With widespread outmigration to Kathmandu as well as
abroad – especially New York City– overall populations have significantly declined as well.

Homes are empty for much of the day while residents tend their shops and guesthouses or work the fields. As villages depopulate, travelers lack familiarity with the few who remain in formerly familiar places. During a three-week field-visit to Mustang in July 2015, my research assistant, Tsering – a native Lo-ba aged 18 – met his nyetsang relations in at least five different villages for the first time. Because he had left home at a young age to attend school in Kathmandu and returned to the district only every few years (and did so by motor vehicle), he had little knowledge of the relationships that comprised his nyetsang network. As it turns out, Tsering told me that this lack of familiarity is a typical, and increasingly problematic, occurrence for his generation and their parents.

Compounding shifting social and economic dynamics related to outmigration and livelihood practices, villages where one’s nyetsang network was traditionally strong are frequently bypassed in favor of destinations down the road due to faster rates of travel. Tenzing explained further:

Now that everyone is busy on their own (livelihood), so people try not to disturb their nyetsang. However, in the past, there was no road – so people (would) take at least a few days to reach their home. So nyetsang (would) continue because there was no option of reaching Jomsom to Lo Monthang in a day; it will take at least 3 days, and on the way of three days – breakfast, lunch, and dinner and lodging all goes with the distance (i.e. was required and received). Now we have road access where we can reach Lo Monthang (in) eight hours from Jomsom. So people don't go to (their) nyetsang (and instead pass through) in Kagbeni, Chuktsang, Tetang, Tsele, and eat lunch in Samar – and then pass by Ghiling, Ghami, and Tsarang village – so as they are skipping nyetsang, slowly such systems are declining.6

Journeying further in a single day and no longer reliant on nyetsang support, travelers in Mustang increasingly turn towards new, roadside lodges instead of traditional forms of reciprocal household hospitality.

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6 Parenthetical insertions added by author for interpretation (quote was provided in English over social media).
Particularly for Mustangi travelers for whom time has become perceived in modernist contexts as equivalent to (or more valuable than) money – and indeed for others who now live outside the district altogether – lodges offer a degree of convenience, informality, and autonomy – distinct trappings of modernity – that contrast with more ‘traditional’ nyetsang experiences. As a distinct global process reflected in local experiences, the stories I heard in Mustang with respect to social and cultural disruptions related to roads has been well recognized in other mountain areas across the world, from West Virginia (Stewart 1996) to Tajikistan (Mostolowsky 2017) and from Peru (Harvey and Knox 2015) to Haiti (Katz 2014). Ultimately, the decline of the nyetsang is thus just one example of the powerful effects of modern transport mobilities on everyday life in Mustang, and, by extension, to broader transformations in socio-spatial practices that constitute spatial consciousness and geographical imaginaries across the trans-Himalaya.

2.4 New Mobilities and Uneven Development

The historical existence of nyetsang resonates with a central claim behind Sheller and Urry’s new mobilities paradigm (2006) – that mobile life, rather than sedentary life, is endemic to society and that mobility should be considered fundamental instead of exceptional to social life. In the case of Mustang, legacies of nyetsang challenge long-standing (and erroneous) depictions of the erstwhile Himalaya Kingdom and modern-day district of Nepal as isolated and remote. Rather than a self-contained and bordered territory, Mustang – as with the greater trans-Himalaya – is in fact a cultural arena into and through which social, economic, and political relationships have long been forged and maintained. Therefore, instead of barriers to movement or deterministic sub-state “containers” (Taylor 1994) that divide spaces of South Asia from the rarified expanses of the Tibetan Plateau, it is more helpful to conceptualize Mustang and the
broader trans-Himalaya as geographical interfaces of socio-cultural and political economic exchange. A mobilities lens thus supports a view of Mustang as inextricably entwined within historical trade networks as well as trans-Himalayan flows of cultural, religious, and political practice; however, the very real presence of state borders in the region today has also helped to reorient populations across Mustang and Tibet both to one another and to their respective states, Nepal and China. In the present moment, new mobility practices and forms of containment together call attention to the ways in which access to road infrastructures, commodity circulations, cash-based political economies, and bureaucratic institutions converge in the transformation of everyday life, reinforcement of social hierarchies, and production of new state formations in Mustang.

Alongside changes to socio-spatial and cultural practices, roads also deepen the ruts of social and spatial difference that they encounter (N. Smith 2006). In looking at places on (and off) roads in rural West Virginia, Stewart (1996) recognizes that rather than making new connections altogether, road access in fact shifts relations that reverberate with more profound exclusions and disruptions. This thinking is advanced by Gupta and Ferguson’s recognition of the ways in which roads connect but also disconnect, a process of location and dislocation through othering (1997). “If one begins with the premise that spaces have always been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference through connection” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 35). While roads are often sold as great equalizers and vectors for capacity building (Bank 2006; Taaffe, Morrill, and Gould 1963), it is in fact just the opposite experience of socio-spatial exclusion and hierarchical re-inscription (Campbell 2010) that defines life by the road for many. That is, new mobilities actually enforce old containments.
As local narratives tell, roads in Mustang are experienced as convenient and economical for some residents, and alienating and marginalizing for others. Jigme expressed this reality to me during one of our conversations in Kagbeni. As a man without the means to own a private vehicle, and without the cash liquidity to charter a jeep to carry goods to his store from bazaars in southern Tibet or central Nepal, he has become increasingly dependent on public transportation networks that do not keep reliable schedules. In addition to creating new costs that he formerly avoided by walking with his goods loaded onto mules, Jigme finds that new roads have made life harder in Mustang. While cargo costs are ultimately lower for truck transport than for mule caravans, the unpredictability of road travel adds additional hardship to what was previously a more dependable journey. “Before (when we walked), you knew how long a trip to Beni or Pokhara would take, and you planned for that (10-12 days). Today, it might take you two days, or it might take you two weeks. We never know.”

At Jigme’s end of the socio-economic spectrum, other locals begrudge the road even more personally. One seasonal teashop owner named Dorje told me “before, it did not cost money to travel (you either walked or rode a horse). But today, if you don’t have money, you cannot travel like the others.” In concert with new road-based mobilities and as I discuss further in Chapter 4, the expansion of cash-based economic relations has shifted the terms of engagement by which Mustang’s residents experience and struggle for access to roads, vehicles, and markets themselves, and this struggle happens at registers with both inter-village and state-based relations. While talking about the social and economic impacts of new roads, Dorje reminisced fondly for the days when the only choice of transport was mule or yak caravan. “It took longer, but it was easier to travel before the road came. We had our animals, and our nyetsang, and we could plan for the journey. Now, it is harder to plan, and everything is more
expensive. In some ways the roads have made things easier (for some), but in other ways the road made it more difficult (for me).” In previous days, Dorje could predictably plan for a trip from Kagbeni to Pokhara, knowing that it would be long and arduous, but that 10-12 days was a reliable and dependable projection for the trip. Today, in contrast, while he can quickly (and expensively) reach Pokhara in just two days by jeep and bus, Dorje does not control his own movement. Reflecting the withering of nyetsang practice, if the vehicle does not come on time – or for that matter, doesn’t come that day, or the next – Dorje is stuck, with a load that he can’t carry alone, and subject to expenses that he must absorb himself or else go hungry and cold.

Jigme and Dorje’s points are that motorized transport tests – and at times steals – one’s agency. When a truck breaks down, and you have no other means of travel, nor nyetsang relations in a nearby village, you have little recourse than to pay for lodging until another vehicle comes by, and that may be in three hours or three days time. Thus, if you are poor, road travel makes everything more difficult, and thereby makes you (feel) poorer. Conversely, however, if you own a vehicle, or have the means to charter a private jeep, or at least sufficient disposable income to pay for lodging when necessary, motorized transport is perceived and lived very differently. That is, the roads are convenient and economical for some (generally for more wealthy residents), and debilitating and frustrating for others (for the less well to do). Despite this distinction, however, elite members of Mustang society also complain about the roads.

Throughout Mustang, it is widely acknowledged that new road systems have negatively impacted foreign trekking tourism. Whereas Jigme and Dorje were open with their complaints about the effects of road transport on everyday life, I heard far more grievances about the road itself – and its apparently negative impacts on business – from hotel owners such as Drolma. For entrepreneurs who have been running guesthouses and restaurants for nearly two decades (many
of whom are large landowners and from noble families who had the savings and capital assets to invest in the new tourism industry in the 1990-2000s), the widespread perception is that road travel is hurting business. While such critiques of the roads were widely voiced by those central to Mustang’s tourism economy – the historically established and wealthier socio-economic class – their complaints are also ironic, as they are predominantly the families who own the vehicles, guest lodges, and cash reserves to invest in both tourism and transport systems and thereby accumulate and reinvest their capital.

When talking about tourism economies or the trekking business, one hotel owner told me, “for bringing things, for local people the road is good…but for tourists, it’s very bad. They don’t like it.” Why is that, I asked. “Because the traffic has become very loud and crowded. They (tourists) like quiet.” The negative impact of roads on the trekking industry is largely because few visitors to Mustang are eager to walk on dusty and at times precarious paths that are now shared with careening jeeps and diesel spewing lorries. However, the perception of these negative effects of the road on tourism is not reflected in the statistics of annual foreign visitors to Mustang. The Mustang roads have been operating for over a decade, and since 2004, tourist numbers (in Mustang as well as other trekking districts in Nepal) have consistently climbed according to Nepal’s Tourism Statistics (from 825 visitors in 2004 to 1282 in 2007, 2162 in 2010, 3883 in 2014) (Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation 2016). Although international tourism to the district did decline by 31% in 2015 (2673 visitors), this reduction is largely attributed to the 2015 earthquakes rather than the negative impacts of the road. Although tourist statistics are not yet available for 2016, word of mouth and anecdotal evidence in Mustang indicates that international tourism made a strong rebound from 2015.
Although foot and horse travel was until very recently the norm for adventure tourism in Mustang, my estimates from field experiences and observations while traveling along the roads and throughout villages of Mustang indicates that at least half of foreign visitors opt for the expedience of travel by motorized vehicles instead – much like local Lo-ba residents themselves. Moreover, road transport has not killed tourism altogether, but rather changed the terms of engagement for foreign visitors and Lo-bas both inside and outside the hospitality business. Hoteliers frequently cite foreigners’ complaints of walking alongside vehicles where established trekking routes have become the new roads. And yet in real terms, tourist numbers in Mustang continue to climb, especially as a result of new middle-class Nepali adventure tourists. Moreover, although foreign trekkers increasingly seek routes off the motor road, they also continue to take lodging in established guesthouses and largely forego the camping-style expeditions that prevailed (and were indeed required) in Mustang less than one decade ago. As Mustang continues to receive higher numbers of visitors each year, hoteliers’ profits have correspondingly climbed. In contrast to complaints about the roads, the capital accumulation generated by tourism is not something that Mustang’s elite tends to criticize.

Despite grievances about the roads’ impacts on tourism and other political economies, road travel and associated mobilities actually reinforce rather than recalibrate social and economic hierarchies in Mustang today. For those with more money, roads are expedient, and travel by vehicle is easy; but for those without the cash, it is quite the opposite experience. This unevenness of landscape and mobility as experienced in Mustang resonates strongly with Harvey and Knox’s analysis of the Interoceanic Highway in Peru, in that “far from creating a homogeneous and integrated territory, these early road construction projects had entrenched a sense of discontinuous space and differential capacities for moving around” (2015: 39).
Transportation requires money in cash or credit, and for communities historically dependent on subsistence agriculture and regional trade and whose livelihoods have been remarkably penetrated by capitalist relations, access to liquid cash or immediate credit can be uneven and tenuous, even when that access is predicated on the tourism industry and remittance economies. Including some while excluding many others, the Mustang roads function largely as vectors for import goods, tourism, and out-migration rather than great social equalizers. And as Nepal’s national development imaginaries envision the Mustang roads becoming a new border corridor for throughput or other trans-national transit, critical development questions remain highly relevant today – development by whom, and development for whom?

Numerous Lo-bas also spoke to me about environmental challenges and risks that tourism and road construction have placed on Mustang’s fragile alpine landscape. Informants in Lo Monthang as well as Kathmandu expressed this concern to me, asking how a landscape already strained to provide adequate fuel sources and water to a relatively small population can be expected to provide for massive amounts of incoming tourists. “And what about the waste?” a Lo-ba in his early twenties asked rhetorically. “In the past, Mustang did not have much garbage, because we made and grew and traded what we needed. But today, you know, you can see all the waste.” We looked around at heaps of Chinese Lhasa beer bottles and plastic wrappers blowing down Lo Monthang’s main bazaar. “China sells us everything, but they do not take it back. What are we going to do when more people come?” Until a viable waste management plan gains traction in Mustang, this worry about waste and environmental degradation will remain another urgent concern and serious reality for the district.
2.5 Conclusion

Geographic imaginaries of trans-Himalayan mobility and lived experiences on (and off) the roads in Mustang are highly discrepant. The expectation that roads will deliver social and economic development – or bikas in Nepal’s national development imaginary – to the borderlands is ambitious but development does not come so easily or evenly. As seen in Mustang, the social dynamics that roads set in motion via new political economies frequently trace old tracks of social division. This is not to say that the benefits of development – such as access and mobility – do not reach a fortunate few; but rather, more often than not, that roads serve to reinforce a certain socio-economic status quo that continues to privilege the already privileged. And alongside these social reinscriptions, modern road systems also contribute to shifting livelihoods and new political economies through which the Nepali state bureaucratizes and territorializes highland spaces.

Following the Mustang-Tibet road, what began as a locally constructed route to improve trans-border mobility, and evolved into a regional effort to grow business enterprises, has led further to central master planning to develop the state and its constituents through the political economic modes of tourism and taxation. On the one hand, new relationships between the state and its citizens based on trans-border commerce and international tourism are being touted as the latest and best way for Mustang to manage its ongoing development strategy through “sustainable livelihoods” based on the region’s historically mobile practices; that is, to bring bikas to the region through new vectors of travel and tourism (Ministry of Transportation 2016; Republica 2017). On the other hand, as political representatives and community leaders in Mustang repeatedly express the vision of making Mustang a new pilgrimage corridor between Nepal and Tibet (Gautam 2017), such a prospect has begun to be questioned by locals acutely
concerned about the significant social disruptions, business risks, and environmental hazards that high volume tourism poses to Mustang’s social and physical landscapes.

This chapter asked about local experiences with jeeps, trucks, and other forms of motorized transport and considered what factors led Mustang communities to build their first road to Chinese Tibet rather than central Nepal. On the basis of this examination, I argue that the development of road infrastructure in Mustang has set the groundwork for new infrastructural interventions and an associated arrangement of mobilities that reinforce historical, social containments. Formed on the basis of trans-border transport infrastructures, new mobility practices have reinscribed longstanding trans-Himalayan social relations for some (such as the wealthier classes) while also disrupting geographic imaginaries for others (such as those whose nyetsang is no longer familiar). Moreover, new dynamics of transport, tourism, and trade also function to produce new space for the state to take shape, an important objective in Nepal marked by new bureaucratic connections between Kathmandu and northern Himalayan districts. Furthermore, the Mustang road also facilitated a local component of a much larger Chinese spatial fix that advances the penetration of new capitalist relations across historically contested borderlands. Together, the transformation of socio-spatial practices, geographic imaginaries, and political economies across the region in turn generates institutional regulations, border regimes, and other state bureaucracies as new mechanisms of containment. As discussed in the following chapters, it is a national-scale vision of bikas that continues to fuel infrastructural and administrative interventions in the district. Expanding upward from the Kathmandu center and downward from Chinese Tibet into the trans-Himalayan borderlands, in Mustang this vision shapes development initiatives including but not limited to new customs and immigration
facilities and plans for a massive dry port to handle growing commodity imports from Tibet (Report 2016b; Tripathi 2016).

By focusing on roads, vehicles, and the people who ply them, this chapter shows how transport systems are implicated in both socio-spatial and territorial processes where local actors and the Nepali state struggle for movement and control over borderland spaces. This is not to say that the roads have established or altogether realigned connections that did not previously exist – for Mustang has long served as a crucial trade route between Tibet and the Indian Subcontinent – but rather that new motor routes have significantly shifted the terms of engagement for relationships in Mustang and between Mustang and neighboring regions. Although the Mustang-Tibet road is now functional, as are congruent road segments that link Upper Mustang with central Nepal, closer examination shows an unevenness of aspirations and outcomes experienced as a result of regional road development. Not only do the Mustang roadways not yet constitute a reliable channel for through traffic between Chinese Tibet and Nepal, but contrary to ambitious projections and national promises, the arrival of the road to Mustang has in fact born bitter fruits and many of the “enchantments of infrastructure” remain largely unfulfilled (Harvey and Knox 2012). Upon close examination, it is great promises, uneven realities, and a reorientation of geographical imaginaries that characterize the expediency of roads in the modernizing borderlands of Nepal.
Chapter 3

Fences

“Even though it’s Nepali land, China controls it”

A biography of the Nepal-China border in Mustang

The first time I tried to visit the Mustang-Tibet border at the Kora La, I didn’t make it. It was mid-April 2015, early spring after a particularly snowy winter. By the time we got within two kilometers of the border-pass, large patches of snow and deep mud pits (where other snow had melted) made the road all but impassable. Having parked our motorcycle at the furthest point up to which we were able to drive, Kalsang and I continued on foot. The trail was all but absent, and the late afternoon sun made the snow pack especially soft. After another hour of hiking – or, rather, walking as gingerly as possible along the snow surface in a futile effort to avoid post-holing every third step – we had made less than half a kilometer progress. Recognizing that there was no realistic way we’d make it to the border, and then back to the bike, and then down to the village before dark, we decided to abort the mission. However, getting to this point was actually not the most difficult part of my attempts to visit the border.

In the days before, when I first started asking around the village of Choesor looking for a ride up to the Kora La, nobody was interested in taking me there. Although the Kora La and the border fence stands little more than ten kilometers from Nyechung, the northernmost village in Mustang, the young men whom I asked were consistently reticent about going. Without a real explanation, nearly everyone simply said they couldn’t or wouldn’t go. I even offered to pay them well – what I thought might entice some of the bolder young men who at the time did not appear to have any significant work to do in the fields, or any other paid employment for that
matter. Although at first I didn’t understand their reluctance, I soon learned that it wasn’t about the money at all.

After asking why everyone was so reluctant to go up to the border despite having little other work that week as well as considering the quick money they could make on the excursion, several young men finally revealed their concern, saying that they simply were “not allowed to go there” (tro chog-gi ma-re). When I then asked how could this be, since the Nepali border officials had already granted us permission to go – and wasn’t the border area and the Kora La in fact Nepali sovereign space – a repeated reply was that “even though it’s Nepali land, China controls it.” This response – that a particular zone of de jure Nepali land was all but off limits to Nepali citizens and de facto controlled by Chinese authorities as an extra-territorial space – opened up a new world of inquiry for me. How and why did the border area come to be so regulated – and regulated more by China than Nepal – in this highland and relatively little-traveled place? When did Lo-bas become so reluctant to visit the border and what did it mean for trans-local livelihoods of trade, transhumance, and agro-pastoralism? How did a historically fluid boundary area transform into an institutional border solidified by a closely monitored fence? And where did the border lie within the social lives and geographical imaginaries of people in Mustang and how did they express this bordering in the practices of everyday life?

Today at the Kora-la, a Chinese-constructed and video-monitored fence securitizes the Mustang-Tibet border between Nepal and China. Although (or perhaps because) I was unable to reach the border on that first excursion, it soon became a key point of research concern, and I was determined to experience and observe what was going on there. Thus, during subsequent visits to the northern villages of Upper Mustang, I continued to ask locals about traveling up to
the fence so that I could see for myself the current state of border infrastructure and better understand why so many Lo-bas told me that it had become a place off limits to them.

*Figure 3.1 Modern border infrastructure at Kora La*

During further conversations, many young men recounted common stories of Mustang locals being apprehended by Chinese authorities for little cause other than being physically near the border fence. Rather perplexed, I asked under what terms a Nepali citizen’s presence in close proximity to the border could be considered a violation, especially when one remained within Nepali state space and made the trip with permission from Nepali border officials no less. Rather than dwelling on why or how this was a violation – and a violation of what, if anything at all – the young men were clear that the landscape on both sides of the border was in fact controlled by China. Although Lo-ba and Tibetan communities alike historically used land on both sides of the border for highland animal husbandry and trans-Himalayan trade, since the late 1990s the area had become a no-go zone for local populations outside of the exceptional time and space of the seasonal *tsongra* trade fairs.
As we talked more, it became apparent that these men felt the border zone was particularly sensitive because of a history of Tibetan exiles moving through the area as well as the close cultural connections between Lo-bas and Tibetans. Echoing the perspective shared by many others, one informant explained, “even though Chushi Gangdruk was here a long time ago, China still worries about the area. Plus, there are many Tibetan refugees in Mustang. And then when the Karmapa left (in 1999), things became more difficult. So now China watches the border very closely.” While generalizing and reifying “China” as an amalgam of border officials and apparatuses of state surveillance linked to the Chinese Communist Party as well as PRC government offices in Beijing and Kathmandu, these young men further implied that the border area and Lo-ba people’s mobility through it had become particularly politicized as a result of the cultural and ethnic Tibetan-ness of the region. Eventually, they told me that because of Beijing’s political concerns over Tibetan separatism in both China and Nepal, the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu had advised the Chinese Armed Police Force (APF) stationed on the Tibetan-side of the border to patrol and securitize the area – effectively controlling Nepali as well as Chinese state territory. On the basis of routine experiences, the men shared a common opinion that it was best not to go anywhere near the border area.

Having gained a better appreciation for the sensitivity of the border but still compelled to make my own visit to the Kora La, in June 2015 I negotiated another ride to within one kilometer of the fence with my friend, Kalsang. Kalsang is regarded as one of the most capable motorcycle riders of Mustang’s northern villages and had navigated the rutted road up to the border fence several times before we ever met. Despite the fact that he had also been apprehended by the Chinese border detail on at least two previous occasions, he agreed to take me close to the border fence and gate at the top of the Kora La. In order to ensure his safety, we agreed to stop at a
location that would allow me easy access to the fence and gate area but also keep Kalsang out of view and thereby mitigate risk. Once ascending the bumpy switchbacks that characterize the Mustang-Tibet road from Nyechung to the Kora La, Kalsang yelled back to me from the front of his motorcycle several times, reminding me to be careful about going close to the gated fence and border marker #24.

**Figure 3.2** Nepal-China Boundary Marker #24 at Kora La

Knowing that this was in fact the exact place I wanted to go – and the very location we’d been negotiating my travel to for more than a day – Kalsang wanted to be sure that I would not get in trouble myself. Assuring him that I would be careful and that he should stay as far away as he liked and out of sight from the border fence, we agreed for him to remain at the historical border marker of the mar-khog chorten, a place undeniably well within Nepali territory. While the location is not controversial today, the mar-khog chorten is also near the site of a unique episode of Sino-Nepali border conflict known as the Mustang Incident discussed more extensively below (Rose 1971; Cowan 2016). Upon reaching the Kora La, Kalsang dropped me
off just beyond the *mar-khog chorten* before turning around and parking his motorcycle at the landmark. I then continued on foot for another kilometer or two up to the border fence and marker #24.

*Figure 3.3 Mar-khog chorten marks the historical Mustang-Tibet border at the Kora La*

Source: Photo by author (June 2015)

Unlike the rugged mountain landscapes that characterize the majority of the Nepal-China borderlands, the Mustang-Tibet border resembles an alpine plain more typical of the Tibetan plateau than the Nepal Himalaya. However, in contrast to most other Nepal-China frontier areas, a barbed-wire fence runs incongruously across the Kora La, marking and controlling the official border at nearly 4000 meters in elevation. And yet also unlike other, official Nepal-China border crossings where roads operate, no personnel are stationed on site at the Kora La to secure Nepali or Chinese state territory. While this human absence contributes to a particularly spare border regime, a locked gate and solar-powered closed-circuit video cameras together produce an oddly intimidating space, a place that is surveilled with remote eyes. And in my short time at the
Mustang-Tibet border, it became quickly evident that I was being watched without there being anyone around.

Within minutes of standing at the fence – where I snapped photos of border marker #24, the metal control gate, and remotely monitored video cameras – a Chinese Armed Police Force SUV quickly appeared upon the horizon across the Tibetan Plateau. Being that I appeared to be the only person, other than Kalsang, for many kilometers around, it was apparent that Mustang locals’ concern was indeed correct – that Chinese authorities were quick to respond to anyone being physically close to the border. While my presence amounted to little more than a lone individual standing near the fence, but preferring to avoid a possible incident with Chinese border officials for both Kalsang’s sake and mine, I made a quick retreat. Kalsang and I hastily descended the Kora La on his motorcycle just as the Chinese APF responders reached the gate.

A strong practice of self-surveillance has been internalized by Mustang populations when traveling anywhere near to the Nepal-China border. This practice is a dual result of the predictability of Chinese officials’ rapid response to one’s physical presence at the border coupled with the unpredictable consequences of a Nepali citizen – especially one with Tibetan cultural attributes – being apprehended by Chinese authorities within Nepali state space. In the case of Mustang, these forms of border management constitute unique practices of Chinese extra-territoriality (Hudson 1998) over Nepali populations. This extra-territoriality is performed both by Chinese APF officials as well as Mustangi populations themselves, entailing the cross-border management of trans-Himalayan mobility practices situated within Nepali territory. In response to security concerns specific to ethnically (but not necessarily politically) Tibetan groups, Chinese officials manage the Mustang-Tibet border area through extra-territorial practices in a place where the sovereign Nepali state’s power and institutional presence is
relatively weak. Reflecting both the structural-institutional and social-symbolic dimensions of borders, these apparatuses of state power coupled with internalized behaviors of self-policing show how borders are produced and performed in particular configurations as regimes of control.

This chapter analyzes the spatial operations of power in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands to argue that border regimes are made, maintained, and performed as territorial controls over social connections and cultural practices as well as state space. To make this argument, I look at the ways that landscapes are transformed into state territories and ask questions about the Mustang-Tibet border at two different registers. First, where does the border lie physically as a marker of state territory between Nepal and China, and why is it where it is? Second, where does the border lie socially and culturally for borderland populations, and how do socio-cultural considerations shape borderland lives between China and Nepal? By paying close attention to the ethnographic terms (Megoran 2006) upon which the Mustang-Tibet border has taken shape and continues to be managed, I use my mobility-containment framework to write a biography (Megoran 2012) on the (re)materializations of this borderland as well as the ways in which the border enables particular terms of mobility for some while defining different rules of containment for others.

As with writing on people, good boundary biographies identify, illuminate, and explain particular moments of change. Often, these are times of creation, disruption, and intervention. The best human stories use key occasions – like when babies are born, marriages happen, and critical decisions are made – as points of inflection to draw broader tales of life and death and the important things that happen in between. Similarly, a fuller understanding of the lives of a border opens up important views into borderland lives themselves. That is, everyday life and geopolitical relations shift when fences are built and gates are closed, when new policies are implemented and people’s access to spaces is adjusted beyond their control.
Following Megoran’s ethnographic work on border configurations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the Fergana Valley (2012), good biographies of international boundaries should do the same: to tell the story of a particular (and ongoing) spatial process. Like divorce, for example, the building of fences separates people and sets new terms for the relationships between nuclear units and their wider family networks. By attending to special moments and events, it becomes possible to illustrate the ways in which boundaries and borders materialize, dematerialize, and rematerialize (Megoran 2006) and how those materializations affect the people and politics that comprise the borderland. Thus, boundary biographies “explore how specific boundaries (and the borders that they produce) appear, reappear and change, and disappear or become less significant in different ways and in different spatial and discursive sites over time (Megoran 2012: 468). This historiographic context of boundary biography helps to nuance and unpack the social processes through which borders take shape (Newman and Passi 1998), a key but incomplete approach to border studies that I discuss more below. In this chapter, I therefore use biography to highlight particular moments of transformation that play a critical role in shifting the terms on which social and political interactions occur in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands.

Critical research in border studies calls for closer analysis of border performativity as well as advancing perspectives to “see like a border” (Johnson et al. 2011). Arguing that sovereignty is constantly performed and resisted, Salter identifies three distinct registers of border performativity (2011): the formal register (the definition and defense of the border); the practical register (the policy of and processing at the border); and the popular register of the border (the everyday forms of experience, resistance, and contestation that reproduce the border) (Salter in Johnson et al. 2011). In order to understand how local communities both see and see like the
border as well as perform and internalize the border (Sahlins 1989) – but not always to their own advantage – this chapter makes a historical and ethnographic examination of three progressions of bordering between Mustang and Tibet.

Towards a trans-Himalayan boundary biography that also advances understandings of border performativity, I examine three specific state interventions that have together shaped the Mustang-Tibet border as it is produced and performed by local populations and state officials today. Situated in three periods between 1960 and the present, these moments of bordering correspond to Salter’s formal, political, and practical registers. First, the 1961 Boundary Treaty between the Kingdom of Nepal and the People’s Republic of China delimited discrete state territories and demarcated the borderlines and boundary markers that exist today. Second, the construction of a Nepal-China border fence by Chinese authorities in 1999 enforced new terms of border management and represents the upper hand that China wields with respect to territorial control over Nepali populations across the border. Third, the protracted suspension of trans-border mobility privileges for Mustang’s communities and the denial of customary rights enshrined for other borderland populations according to Nepal-China Border Citizenship illustrates how ethnic and cultural connections between Mustang and Tibet influence exceptional state policies across the region. Finally, I then use these registers to analyze how the Mustang-Tibet border regime has taken shape in recent years and the ways in which bordering affects social and geopolitical relations between Nepal and China today.

Examined through these three specific changes over time, this chapter writes a biography of the Nepal-China border at Mustang to further show how infrastructures of mobility and containment correspond to and reproduce one another. Complementing the previous chapter that illustrated how roads and new mobility practices shape unique experiences with containment at
both social and state levels, this chapter sees borders as state bureaucracies of containment that are formed in response to and in order to control a community’s particular mobility practices. In the case of the Mustang-Tibet border, this dialectical tension of mobility and containment is specifically predicated on Tibetan ethnic identities and cultural practices that are strongly present on both sides of the border. By looking at the border and the way it is performed, I reveal how the convergence of trans-Himalayan geographical imaginaries, Tibetan ethnicities, and geopolitical relations configure the territorialization of state space between Nepal and China.

3.1 Borders as Process, Borders as Practice, Borders as Performance

Borders are process, symbol, institution, and place. A fundamental structure of the modern state, borders are constitutive of national formations of identity, citizenship, territory, and sovereignty (Salter 2008). Borders can also be viewed as a social relation and reflect a convergence of bureaucratic control of and over populations and landscapes. As such, borders are processes that, like territory (Elden 2013), are always unfolding, routinely contested, and constantly (re)negotiated. The social, political, territorial, and cultural interactions through which a border is envisioned, created, and contested calls for a conceptual approach to bordering as performance and a way of thinking and seeing borders as an always unfolding process (Salter 2011).

Material institutions as well as ideological symbols (Paasi 1996), borders give shape and meaning to state formations, national identities, community consciousness, and geographical imaginaries. Paasi suggests two (non-exclusive) modalities for understanding borders: “discursive landscapes of social power” (e.g. nation, nationalism, and memory) and “technical landscapes of social control” (e.g. state, sovereignty, and territory) (1996). This chapter
examines the Mustang-Tibet border with respect to both of these modalities, according to the internal and social effect of the border for Lo-ba and Tibetan populations as well as the external and physical location of the border as a marker of territorial power.

Borders are also fundamental to the conceptualization of identities (Sahlins 1989). Both despite and because of borders, those identities often transcend local, national, and international scales. In his influential study on the formation of national identity and territory in the Pyrenean borderlands of Cerdanya, Peter Sahlins illustrates how Cerdans came to construct and assume themselves as Frenchmen and Spaniards while never abandoning a particular sense of place. Pointing to the ways in which state formation and nation building were “two-way processes” that balanced on a fulcrum of borderland identity, Sahlins shows that “states did not simply impose their values and boundaries on local society. Rather, local society was a motive force in the formation and consolidation of nationhood and the territorial state [...] But the shape and significance of the boundary line was constructed out of local social relations in the borderland” (1989: 8).

Sahlins’s historical research demonstrates how local communities and social groups shape their own national identities and how borderland populations leverage respective national identities when making claims for and against the state. As a result of the creation of distinct “us” and “them” orientations – always critical to the definition of identity – Sahlins goes on to show how “local society brought the nation to the village” rather than the other way around (1989: 9). That is, rather than the consolidating work of a centralized state, it was the local expressions and place-based practices of national identity that ultimately functioned to make villages of Cerdanya into state spaces of both France and Spain.
Similar to villages across the Mustang-Tibet borderlands, “although enclosed by high mountains, the Cerdanya was not as isolated as might first seem” (Sahlins 1989: 16). Numerous passes in and out of the valley, to neighboring villages, provinces, and states situated Cerdans, like Lo-bas, Tibetans, and other trans-Himalayan populations, as both highly mobile but also reliant on the formation of strong identities in order to maintain social and cultural practices and lay claim to regional territories. Also like Cerdanya, Mustang is a borderland space with complex legacies of warfare. Moreover, it too is a place where communities on both side of the (Nepal-China) border share distinct cultural affinities and attributes that mark most local inhabitants as far closer in social (and economic) relations to one another than with central state centers (of Kathmandu and Beijing).

While these aspects of borderland identity mark key similarities between Mustang and Cerdanya, the operations of the border with respect to mobility and containment are distinctly different, as are the ways in which identities are conceptualized and leveraged. As Sahlins shows, the borders between Cerdaña and Cerdagne were easily transited for Cerdan populations. Trans-border mobilities were fundamental to the formation of local identities and, moreover, these identities informed claims to nationality as Spaniards and Frenchmen, respectively. Conversely, and as I will show below, while the border between Mustang and Tibet is perhaps more rigid today than other times in recent memory, and mobility practices have been heavily restricted, Lo-ba and Mustang identity not only transcends the containments of the border, but is quite possibly closer and more stronger for it. That is, in contrast to Sahlins’s identification of “identity as opposition” (1989: 272), an ethno-national identity in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands can be better conceived of today as “identity in connection.”
Through the creation of “us” versus “them” distinctions, borders provide order by creating difference. And yet, borders themselves are always changing. As a “system of order through which control can be exercised” (Newman 2006: xx), borders are part and parcel of the process of othering through which us/them and we/other binaries are imagined and articulated. In contrast to this division of othering, however, borders and boundaries are also an interface for social and cultural engagement. As Sahlins (1989) shows, while borders establish us/them differentiations, borders also motivate identifications where those on the other side of the border are routinely familiar. As such, borders become tools for localism and nationalism alike.

Following Sahlins, Newman suggests “perhaps the most important question concerning borders is the extent to which they function as barriers to movement and interaction, or as an interface where meetings places and points of contact are created” (Newman 2003: 22). Rather than static “artifacts on the ground” (Agnew, Mitchell, and Toal 2008), borders are in fact dynamic and highly “variable zones” (Minghi 1963) that both shape and are shaped by physical and cultural landscapes. By examining borders through personal narratives as well as close analysis of place, ethnographic approaches to border studies (Megoran 2006, 2012; Wilson and Donnan 1998; Donnan and Wilson 2012) are generative for interpreting the connections between identity and subjectivity with respect to borders and bordering.

Arguing for more ethnographic engagement to advance border studies in critical political geography, Megoran makes a case for grounded participant observation to augment more popular textual and technico-legal approaches to border studies. Following Donnan and Wilson, Megoran points to how “a study of the everyday lives of border communities is simultaneously the study of the daily life of the state, illuminating ‘how power is demonstrated, projected, and contested in the social, economic, and political practices of quotidian life at international
borders” (Megoran 2006: 627 [citing Donnan and Wilson 1999: 155]). While borderland spaces are often overlooked as peripheral zones of marginal interest to the state center, closer ethnographic work shows the error in this view. That is, grounded and participatory attention to borderlander lives can bring new focus to bear on state centers. By examining the everyday practices by which communities identify, engage, and transcend the border, the social and political landscapes of the borderlands render visible and apparent the geopolitical concerns and priorities of the central state. As I argue further in this study, one should go to and study the borders in order to better see and understand the state.

Borders, boundaries, and frontiers are mutually constitutive but distinctly different. Both territorially and conceptually, borders and frontiers meet across boundary spaces. Boundaries are landscapes of intersection – often at a political or social frontier – that take shape through cultural engagements as well as processes of demarcation. Drawn across frontiers and informing the parameters of boundary spaces, borders are discrete lines that designate a limit to political and territorial space; however, social relations routinely transcend borders. While borders are a characteristic of frontier areas, the frontier is in fact the social and physical landscape across which trans-border relations are maintained. Thus, borders can be thought of as primarily institutional with territorial functions while frontiers are more social spaces defined by cultural connections (and disconnections).

Boundaries are composed of both borders and frontiers. Kolossov and O’Loughlin (1998) provide a useful distinction between the de jure case of boundaries as borders (designated political and administrative lines that are both institutional and symbolic) versus the de facto case of boundaries as frontiers (more ambiguous and flexible spaces shaped by ethnic, cultural, and linguistic factors). This de jure-de facto boundary framework also maps onto Kristof’s historical
conceptualization of centripetal-centrifugal border-frontier dynamics (1959). According to Kristof, borders exert a centripetal force on populations and orient peripheral subjects of a border space back towards a political or cultural core – particularly a state center – and furthermore generate discrete we-other distinctions. Conversely, frontier areas constitute an interface of boundary spaces and exist on both sides of borders; by exerting a centrifugal and outward force, frontiers orient populations away from state centers and bridge social relations across borders that help to disrupt and dissolve we-other binaries. In the sections below, I explore how these frontier-border dynamics are seen in the social and cultural affinities maintained by populations on both sides of the Mustang-Tibet border despite contrasting citizenships in Nepal and China.

The performance and practice of bordering reveals how borders designate state space, condition social relations, and both influence and are affected by ethnic identities and geographical imaginaries. Dynamic processes, institutions, and symbols, borders are constituted by everyday or bottom up practices as well as top down state policies. For example, the ways in which local populations in Mustang avoid the border – through both (im)mobile practices and territorial thinking – in fact operates to reinforce the border itself. Conversely, the physical and institutional presence of the border serves not only to designate Nepali and Chinese state space, but also to control the everyday activities of populations that live in and across those spaces. In the case of the Mustang-Tibet border, it is the very socio-cultural composition and Tibetan-ness of local populations on both sides of the border that motivated the Chinese state to build a fence and securitize the border.

Arguing that identity is closely linked to experiences with and at the border, Paasi (1996) uses spatial socialization to conceptualize the ways in which borders are mobilized and leveraged to define and reinforce notions of national identity and place. Spatial socialization means that the
border itself and the space it exists to control contribute to the social and cultural character of populations living within its bounds. For Mustang’s Lo-ba communities who live on the Nepali side of the border, spatial socialization is experienced as a distinct subjectivity under Chinese power predicated on both a geographical proximity to and cultural affinity to Tibet. By placing limits on mobility and enforcing containment, Chinese security of the Mustang-Tibet border generates a spatial socialization that directly influences how Mustang populations move, operate, and think, especially through distinct disciplinary practices of self-surveillance.

My experience at the Mustang-Tibet fence and the ways in which Lo-bas self-police their behavior around the Kora La can be understood through Foucault’s theorization of “discipline” (1995). The panoptical power of state discipline is evident in the ways in which societies police themselves when they are being watched, and, even more importantly, when they are not (or do not know whether or not they are) being directly observed. This policing becomes internalized through a normalization of vulnerable subject positionality beneath a perceived panoptical gaze of the state. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault illustrates how power has been institutionalized and normalized across Western society according to political, economic, and technical systems with common carceral modalities. From the prison to the parade ground, the classroom to the hospital ward, Foucault demonstrates that the state assumes, holds, and wields asymmetrical power over individuals (namely, their bodies, minds, and souls) on the discursive basis of a sophisticated penal system.

Foucault argues that disciplinary systems and state power are linked through three convergent yet disparate modalities. Respective to the “political anatomy” of the prisoner (body, mind, and soul) that was subject to sovereign-state power, these include: the monarchical system that punished the criminal’s *body* as revenge for violations against the crown (physical violence);
the reformist system that incarcerated the prisoner and controlled the mind through isolation with the professed, if unrealized, objective of rehabilitation (psychological warfare); and finally, the more recent prison institution that appropriates the soul (as well as body) of the criminal and, through penal labor, creates production mechanisms for society via material and physical punishments (Foucault 1995). Significantly, the artifacts of these overlapping modalities are present not only in modern prison systems, but also in state border infrastructures as particular bureaucracies of containment.

The spatial operations of Chinese power over ethnic-political subjects in both Nepali and Chinese territory reflects control over borderland populations according to Foucault’s political anatomy of discipline. At the Mustang-Tibet border, both Lo-bas (as citizens of Nepal) and Tibetans (as either residents of Nepal or citizens of China) can be arrested and detained by Chinese border officials. The possibility of detention poses physical risk to Lo-ba bodies; the practice of self-policing as a mechanism to avoid possible arrest represents control over Lo-ba minds; the reality of danger for being ethnically and culturally Tibetan in a borderland space presents power over Lo-ba souls. These dynamics are a result of Chinese strategies of border management and demonstrate how disciplinary power has been implemented and maintained over subject populations across bordered landscapes.

While Foucault’s work did not focus on borders per se, his theorization of discipline is useful for this study because it helps me interpret how Lo-ba populations have internalized and perform the Mustang-Tibet border across multiple populations and at various “anatomical” registers. That is, the ways in which local populations have internalized the Mustang-Tibet border is reflected in the practices by which Lo-bas navigate and/or avoid the border as a habit of self-surveillance and policing. On several occasions, this self-policing was articulated in the form
of anxious explanations as to why nobody wanted to bring me up to the Kora La. As several young men explained their refusal to bring me to the border: “because the Chinese are watching, and if they see us, they will catch us.” Moreover, while Foucault’s work in *Discipline and Punish* examined the operations of central state authority and how that power is consolidated through particular institutions, it remains essential to look far from the center and instead to the borderlands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the spatial operations of state power, and especially its movement and expansion outward from various state centers to international borderlands or perceived peripheries. In the case of Mustang, this applies to sovereign power of the Nepali state as well as – and equally important – the extra-territorial power of China.

### 3.2 Border Making: Boundaries, Lines, and Treaties

Before the 1960s, the border between Nepal and China – especially the area at Mustang-Tibet – was recognized as a “customary boundary line” (Jain 1981: 307) and thus functioned largely as a *de facto* boundary space rather than a rigid, *de jure* state border. In the years between 1960 and 1963, however, several border controversies and episodes of violence motivated Nepali and Chinese leadership to formalize and regulate the Mustang-Tibet boundary area. Bauer notes that “during the second half of the twentieth century, the emerging nation-states of Nepal, China, and India changed their frontiers into borders.” (2010: 107). This formalization of the frontier into a border reflects an iterative process of bordering defined and shaped by a sequence of treaties and agreements, including specifically the 1960 *Boundary Agreement*, the 1961 *Boundary Treaty*, and the 1963 *Border Protocol*.

Eventual resolution on the Nepal-China border was motivated by a controversy over state sovereignty in Mustang in the summer of 1960 known as the Mustang Incident. In spring 1960,
amidst a rising flood of Tibetan exiles but prior to the eventual buildup of Tibetan Chushi Gangdruk guerrilla fighters in Mustang, the Chinese PLA commenced patrols along the China-Nepal border. On 28 June 1960, these patrols encountered an unarmed patrol of seventeen Nepali police dressed in civilian clothes in the demilitarized zone of the Kora La (Rose 1971). The Chinese PLA opened fire on the Nepali squad, killing one member of the group and taking ten more prisoners; six others fled to safety (Cowan 2016). It is imperative to note here that all of this happened entirely within Nepali territory. Nepal’s Prime Minister B. P. Koirala, outraged by this invasion of and assault on Nepali state space, specifically asserted that the Chinese action violated the 21 March 1960 Agreement between the Government of the People’s Republic of China and His Majesty’s Government of Nepal (1960 Boundary Agreement), namely Article IV.

In an effort to establish more formal recognition of the border beyond what up until March 1960 had been regarded as a customary boundary line, the 1960 Boundary Agreement specifically stated:

The Government of the People’s Republic of China and His Majesty’s Government of Nepal have noted with satisfaction that the two countries have always respected the existing traditional customary line and lived in amity. With a view to bringing about the formal settlement of some existing discrepancies in the boundary between the two countries and the scientific delineation and formal demarcation of the whole boundary line, and to consolidating and further developing friendly relations between the two countries, the two Governments have decided to conclude the present Agreement under the guidance of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and have agreed upon the following…(Jain 1981: 307).

In Five Articles, the Agreement goes on to state that the Parties will: scientifically delineate and formally demarcate the entire boundary “on the basis of the existing traditional customary line” (Article I); “set up a joint committee composed of an equal number of delegates from each side” (Article II); dispatch field teams to “conduct survey on the spot and erect boundary markers” to coordinate maps and the customary boundary with actual jurisdiction (Article III); “to ensure tranquility and friendliness on the border, each side will no longer dispatch armed personnel to patrol the area on its side within twenty kilometers of the border” (Article IV); and that the
Agreement will be ratified as quickly as possible but “cease to be in force when the Sino-Nepalese boundary treaty” is signed by the two Governments (Article V) (Jain 1981: 307-10).

In the wake of the Mustang Incident, Nepal Prime Minister Koirala’s remonstrance sought apology and reparations from his Chinese counterpart, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, for violating the spirit of the Agreement and specifically the non-militarization policy as stated by Article IV. Following a quick series of high-level talks and correspondence, the diplomatic exchange yielded a Chinese apology for the Nepali casualty and the reestablishment of a twenty-five kilometer demilitarized zone on both sides of the border (Hyer 2015; Cowan 2016). While Chinese leadership refused to concede that the Incident had occurred within Nepali territory in Mustang, the resolution nevertheless realigned territory between Nepal and China with an overall 300 square kilometer territorial gain in favor of Nepal (Shrestha 2013).¹

Although the 1960 Boundary Agreement accepted the traditional customary line as the basis for a border treaty (Intelligence 1965), the Mustang Incident also underscores that this traditional but largely ambiguous boundary was indeed problematic. While the customary line was shaped by physical geographical features of natural watersheds and mountain peaks – an example of border making according to metes and bounds (Kimmerling et al. 2012) – in the wake of the Incident, Nepali and Chinese parties both expressed a renewed commitment to establish a more formally delimited and demarcated border. Over the course of fifteen months following the Mustang Incident between July 1960 and October 1961, a productive series of talks and communiqués including ranking diplomats as well as the Nepali Prime Minister and Chinese Premier led to a more formal arrangement to officially delimit and demarcate the entire 1111-kilometer Nepal-China border (Rose 1971).

¹ More recent analysis made by Sam Cowan upon the release of previously classified documents suggests that the Incident occurred within Nepali territory, and even further south than the mar-khog chorten itself (2016). Source includes personal communication with Gen. Sir Sam Cowan, December 2015-January 2016.
In October 1961, a Joint Commission of both Nepali and Chinese officials convened in Beijing to codify documents to formally establish the border. This process yielded the first official *Boundary Treaty between the Kingdom of Nepal and The People’s Republic of China* (1961 *Boundary Treaty*), signed in Beijing on 5 October 1961 by His Majesty King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah of Nepal and Liu Shao-chi, Chairman of the People’s Republic of China (Nepal 1961). As stated in the Treaty,

The Contracting parties, basing themselves on the traditional customary boundary line and having jointly conducted necessary on-the-spot investigations and surveys and made certain adjustments in accordance with the principles of equality, mutual benefit, friendship and mutual accommodation, hereby agree on the following alignment of the entire boundary line from west to east, Nepalese territory being south of the line and Chinese territory north thereof…(Nepal 1961).

*Figure 3.4 1961 Nepal-China Boundary Treaty*


In addition to detailing the rivers, mountain peaks, valleys, and other landscape features that formed the basis for the delimitation, the *Boundary Treaty* goes on to specify precise point-to-point landmarks that had been mutually recognized as Nepal-China border points and that
were reflected in official 1:500,000 scale border maps (Jain 1981: 356). Further building on the 1960 *Boundary Agreement*, the 1961 *Treaty* also established preliminary locations for official boundary pillars that were installed to concretize the border both materially and institutionally. In concert with bureaucratic negotiations towards the codification of the *Treaty*, practices of ground-truthing the customary line and the production of official border maps advanced the transformation of a traditional and customary *de facto* boundary space into a *de jure* international border (Kolossov and O'Loughlin 1998).

*Map 3.1 Nepal-China Boundary Treaty 1:500,000 map of northwest Nepal with Mustang*


Following two more years of border work and expanding on the 1960 *Agreement* and the 1961 *Treaty*, in January 1963 the China Nepal *Boundary Protocol* (1963 *Boundary Protocol*) further formalized the border. In addition to general provisions (Part 1: Articles 1-5), the *Boundary Protocol* re-established the terms of recognition for alignment of the boundary lines (Part 2: Articles 6-19); locations of boundary markers (Part 3: Articles 20-21); maintenance of the boundary line and the boundary markers (Part 4: Articles 22-31); and final clauses (Part 5: Articles 32-33). In precise description of the alignment of the boundary line, the Protocol
outlines the length of the 1111.47 kilometer border, identifies and locates in serial form the 79 boundary markers, and provides representation of the boundary line and boundary markers in a new set of “detailed maps attached to the Chinese-Nepalese Boundary Treaty” (Jain 1981: 372-73). However, detailed 1:50,000 scale maps accompanying the 1963 Protocol have never been made available to the public domain. Setting the terms for subsequent, joint-inspection of the border in five year intervals and allowing that no boundary line or marker is to be moved unilaterally, the Protocol further states that both Nepal and China are “deeply convinced that this will help strengthen the traditional friendship between the two peoples and further consolidate and promote the friendly and good-neighborly relations between the two countries…” (Jain 1981: 372).

Between 1963 and 1979 and again in December 1988 and May 2005, Chinese and Nepali authorities drafted several iterative editions of the Protocol along with another series of maps designating the borders. Although the series of 1963 maps was reproduced in 1979, the border features and markers remain the same. Ultimately, these documents do not so much revise the border and respective delimitations so much as revisit the agreements on state space and address the arduous task of actually demarcating and maintaining a trans-Himalayan border. The reviews have included physical visits to border sites to inspect, assess, and repair border markers as well as more recent efforts to collect GPS coordinates at each site (Shrestha 2013). Since 1961, however, the delimitations to the Nepal-China border have not changed.

Especially important in the case of the Mustang-Tibet border, Nepal-China bordering has been expressed both historically and more recently by international infrastructure projects and policy agreements on trade relations. For example, the evolution of border treaties and protocols was tied to new levels of Chinese aid and investment in infrastructural development across Nepal.
as well as an opening up of trans-border trade between Nepal and Tibet. Just one month before the codification of the 1961 *Boundary Treaty*, on 5 September 1961, His Majesty’s Government of Nepal and the Government of the People’s Republic of China concluded a breakthrough *Protocol to the Agreement on Economic Aid* between China and Nepal. Rearticulating an explicit expression of “friendship” focused on technical expertise and infrastructure development, this *Protocol on Economic Aid* led directly to the China-Nepal Highway Construction Agreement of 15 October 1961 and the development of the China-Nepal Arniko-Friendship Highway (Jain 1981). Further building on the 1963 *Protocol*, on 9 May 1964, the *China-Nepal Trade Agreement* specifically outlined measures for “developing the friendship between the two countries and strengthening the economic and trade relations between the two countries, especially the traditional trade relations between Nepal and the Tibet Region of China…on the basis of equality and mutual benefit.” (Jain 1981: 378). As I discuss further in this chapter, by permitting petty traditional trade for border inhabitants on a barter basis and within 30 kilometers of the border, it was this 1964 *Trade Agreement* that first set the ground rules for Nepal-China border policies and moreover shaped eventual border performances with respect to the Nepal-China Border Citizenship Card.

Summarily expressed in the 1963 *Protocol* statement as being to “promote the friendly and good-neighborly relations between the two countries…” (Jain 1981: 372), these policies and programs exhibit, from 1961 until today, a powerful co-relationship between Nepal-China border management, state security, infrastructure development, and trade relations across trans-Himalayan spaces. Going back to the Mustang Incident and in the wake of Tibetan resistance movements in the 1960s, this convergence of bordering, security, and infrastructure is significantly due to Beijing’s desire to maintain a stable relationship with Kathmandu in order to
manage Tibetan populations-in-exile. From the rural development of the Arniko-Friendship Highway to urban construction of the Kathmandu Ring Road in the 1960s, this border security-international investment-infrastructure development nexus is further repeated by more recent Chinese commitments to trans-border development of roads, fences, and facilities for energy production between Tibet and the Nepal borderlands. Following this trajectory of development but before looking at more contemporary expressions of Chinese investment in Nepal, it is necessary to first examine the social and geopolitical factors that led to the physical fencing of the Mustang-Tibet border in 1999-2000.

3.3 Containing the Grasslands and Fencing the Border

Through formal delimitation and demarcation, the 1961 Boundary Treaty and 1963 Boundary Protocol accelerated the shift from a “traditional and customary” trans-Himalayan boundary space into a modern state structure. However, despite the progression of agreements, treaties, and protocols that shaped the Nepal-China border in the 1960s, it was not until 1999 that the Mustang-Tibet section of the border was actually secured by a fence. An unprecedented Chinese response to perceived Tibetan transgression and movements into exile, the fencing of the border solidified what had up to that time remained a relatively open and fluid boundary space, despite the concretization of boundary markers and various episodes of border disputes and periodic violence. In order to more closely link a historical border biography with ethnographic understanding of bordering as process, practice, and performance, this section provides a closer examination of what precipitated the fencing of the Mustang-Tibet border and the effects of the fence on everyday livelihoods in Mustang today.
While the iterative agreements, treaties, and protocols on the Nepal-China border illustrate Salter’s formal register of bordering as policy, the fencing of the Mustang-Tibet border represents a material and practical register of bordering practice and constitutes a distinct agenda of containment. While the Chinese construction of a fence starting in 1999 struck many Lo-bas and others in Mustang as an abrupt transformation in the management of their boundary space, informants also acknowledged a more protracted, gradual process that has together changed the Mustang-Tibet frontier into a modern state border. In concert with the fence itself, the formation of new border regimes – comprising surveillance systems and remote border guards as well as new customs and quarantine policies – has disrupted many livelihood practices and required the renegotiation of socio-economic relations at numerous registers between Mustang and Tibet. In so doing, Nepali and Chinese state interventions have radically altered Lo-ba and Tibetan communities’ experiences with the social and physical landscapes that comprise the border and brought forth new configurations of sovereignty and extra-territoriality across the region.

The shift towards stricter regulations over mobility and livelihood practices across the Mustang-Tibet border began soon after the Chinese PLA occupation of Tibet and prior to the implementation of the 1961 *Boundary Treaty*. As identified by Goldstein and Beall (1990), Chinese prohibitions on nomadic travel and collectivization of Tibetan pastoralists in the 1950s led to a dramatic change in pastoral and trade practices across the wider trans-Himalaya that also affected Nepal’s borderland populations. For highland Nepal’s pastoralists, farmers, and traders, new Chinese policies began to foreclose spaces on both sides of the border that had been historically open for seasonal access to grassland pasturing and borderland markets for the regular trade of salt, grains, crops, animals, and other goods (van Spengen 2000; Furer-Haimendorf 1988; Fisher 1987). Beginning in August 1962, delegates from the Chinese-
Nepalese Joint Boundary Committee agreed on new terms for the management of both trans-frontier land cultivation and trans-frontier pasturing. In contrast to the historical fluidity of this boundary, the Committee stated that, for farmers, “both governments shall adopt measures to abolish any trans-frontier cultivation which now exists or may arise from the delimitation of the boundary” and, for pastoralists, that “each party shall see to it that no new cases of trans-frontier pasturing shall be allowed for its border inhabitants, nor shall the trans-frontier pasturing which has been given up be resumed in the territory of the other party” (Jain 1981: 365). As a result of this bordering practice, winter grasses, spring trade fairs, and summer salt routes were increasingly inaccessible if not altogether suspended.

Looking at progressively imposed constraints on Nepali communities following the Chinese PLA occupation of Tibet, Bishop (1990) and Bauer (2010) discuss similar patterns of restriction over cross-border mobility for trans-Himalayan populations in Humla and Dolpo, respectively. This was particularly the case for winter and summer pasturing. Historically, livestock herds from Nepal and India were moved to the Changtang grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau in the winter months and Tibetan herds were brought to Nepal and Indian Himalayan spaces in the summer (Bauer 2010). While spring and autumn grazing were less severely affected because they took place within closer proximity to the border and within the parameters of the thirty-kilometer range of mobility for border citizens, more extensive and distant pastoral relationships that had been cultivated for centuries were upended as a result of Chinese rule in Tibet. Bauer notes, “The establishment of Chinese frontier posts across the Himalayas terminated these ancient neighborly customs” (2010: 112). Of course, studies on the building of fences (and roads) show that infrastructural interventions disrupt transhumance and agro-pastoral livelihoods far beyond the trans-Himalaya. From the demarcations of national parks in Kenya and Tanzania
(Goldman 2009; Goldman and Turner 2011) to the production of soy and cattle farms in the Paraguayan Chaco (Lambert and Nickson 2006), fences, roads, and other infrastructural projects made to advance state-led development routinely materialize not just as particular kinds of border regimes but also generate new strategies and practices by which rural populations adapt to and transgress the fences and walls themselves.

Documenting the ways that long-distance trade coupled with pastoralist practices long sustained trans-Himalayan livelihoods, Fürer-Haimendorf illustrates how the transformation of the traditional frontier into a modern state border effected expansive and ongoing transitions to economic relations and social patterns throughout the trans-Himalaya (Fürer-Haimendorf 1988). In his ethnography of Thakali and Lo-ba traders of the Kali Gandaki (Thak Khola), Fürer-Haimendorf notes that the “trade of the Thak Khola and the adjoining regions of Lo and Dolpo used to be dominated by Thakalis, but the dwindling of trans-Himalayan trade due to the occupation of Tibet by Chinese forces in 1959 has caused a shift in the remaining trade from big merchants to smaller operators, many of whom are not Thakalis” (1988: 181). Although the Chinese control of Tibet in the 1950s significantly reduced the cross-border flow of salt as well as wool and grain products, it wasn’t until the 1960s that Thakali salt trade monopolies based in Tukche were shattered by the national introduction of iodized Indian salt into the Nepali market. Thus in concert with the securitization of the Mustang-Tibet border, regional participation in the salt trade was first distributed from the hands of powerful Thakali salt houses and then more widely reduced as a leading economic livelihood for communities up and down the Kali Gandaki Valley. Accelerated by external state forces and pointing to modern processes of territorialization, shifts to the customary livelihood practices of animal husbandry as well as salt
trading across the trans-Himalayan boundary zone were further affected by changes to the locations and lines of bordering at the Mustang-Tibet interface.²

The transformation of the historical Mustang-Tibet frontier into the modern Nepal-China border also entailed the reorganization of socio-cultural and political economic landmarks into new landscapes of state control. Before 1963, formal Nepali and Chinese government checkpoints were notably absent across the boundary space and the border was designated by the mar-khod chorten located atop the Kora La pass. Serving for centuries as a functional and de facto boundary, kora la remains the colloquial term used by locals for the official Nepal-China border in Mustang. Despite the Kora La’s nomenclature as a pass, however, the terrain more closely resembles a high alpine plain common to the Tibetan Plateau rather than a V-shaped mountain saddle typical of many other Himalayan passes. Widely traversed until the 1950s by pastoralists, pilgrims, and caravans engaged in the trans-Himalayan salt trade, the Kora La’s gentle slopes situated the pass as a key corridor between Mustang and Tibet. Both spaces for navigation and places of socio-economic activity, the Kora La and mar-khod chorten marked not only the trade route itself but also served as locations for annual trade fairs and regional deal making. It was very close to the mar-khod chorten that the Mustang Incident occurred in summer 1960 and resolution on the Incident, inscribed in the 1961 Boundary Treaty, was predicated on social and political histories that located the site within Nepali territory (Cowan 2016).³

In accordance to the 1961 Boundary Treaty, the formalization of the Mustang-Tibet border was further advanced by the construction of border pillar #24 at the Kora La. Today, pillar #24 stands approximately 2.5 kilometers north of the historical mar-khod chorten. Though

² In the following Chapter 4, I discuss in more detail the ways in which this bordering fundamentally disrupted the long distance salt trade that was central to trans-Himalayan political economies.

³ As recently as summer 2015 and discussed more extensively in Chapter 5, it was also at the mar-khod chorten that Tibetan and Chinese officials under direction of the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu dropped substantial caches of post-earthquake humanitarian aid to support reconstruction efforts across Mustang district.
small in size, this installation marks another key step in the progression of the Kora La from traditional boundary space to the barbed wire fenced border. Despite recurrent episodes of Chinese, Tibetan, and even Indian military and intelligence activities within close proximity to the border throughout the 1960-70s (Cowan 2015), border pillar #24 was all that marked the separation of Nepali and Chinese state territory until construction of the fence began in 1999.

Map 3.2 Google Earth image of Kora La and mar-chog chorten relative to Nepal-China border

Source: Map made by author online with Google Earth (January 2016)

In contrast to containments enshrined by the designation of the Nepal-China border in the early 1960s and early restrictions placed on mobility across it, travel to Tibet for trade, pastoralism, and pilgrimage was generally permitted for Nepal’s borderland populations from the 1970s until the late 1990s. As a result of the demobilization of the Tibetan resistance in 1970 and the cessation of the movement by 1974 (McGranahan 2010; Cowan 2016), Chinese militarization and direct surveillance of the border was initially reduced. In the late 1970s, following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution in China,
Chinese Communist Party policy permitted new degrees of socio-spatial practices across Tibet, including religious teaching and monastic education as well as less restrictive regulations over mobility and livelihoods for ethnic minority populations (MacInnis 1989). In the 1980s, further economic and social reforms in China under Deng Xiaoping led to the relaxation of border policies and opened the door for more active trade, pastoralist, and religious practices between Tibet and trans-Himalayan populations as well as Tibetan exile communities in South Asia (Ma 2011). Elder informants in Mustang reported that from the 1980s to the 1990s, Lo-ba pilgrimage to Lhasa, participation in trans-border pastoralism, and regional trade was more openly allowed than at any other time since before the Chinese occupation of Tibet. During this time, monks were again able to study and train at the great Sakya monasteries of Central Tibet and marriage practices were renewed between Lo-ba and Tibetan families.

In 1999, however, the escape of one of Tibet’s highest ranking and most politically visible lamas, His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa Urgyen Trinley Dorje, caused a quick and effective reversal of what had become normalized as a relatively relaxed border policy between Mustang and Tibet. Prior to his escape through Mustang en route to exile in Dharamsala, India, the Karmapa was a fourteen-year old monk in training at Tsurphu Monastery, the seat of the powerful Karma Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The reincarnated heir to a continuously running 900-year lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, the Karmapa was also preparing to assume leadership of a broad network of subsidiary monasteries, including centers in China, Nepal, and India as well as numerous countries in Europe and North America. At the time of his flight, the 17th Karmapa was also the first and only Tibetan monk to have been officially recognized as a reincarnate lama – or tulku – both by the Dalai Lama and the Chinese Communist Party (Terhune 2004). Due to the previous Karmapa’s international reputation, the vast financial and property
wealth of the Karma Kagyu sect, and the power of religious authority he was being groomed to assume over thousands of Tibetan followers, the young Karmapa was inherently a political force and closely watched by Chinese state authorities. Despite claims by the Karmapa’s offices that the flight into exile was made to gain higher-level education in India and monastic training unavailable in Tibet (Brown 2010), it was also widely acknowledged throughout Tibetan communities that the Karmapa was believed to be sufficiently poised and positioned to inherit unprecedented political responsibilities alongside – and eventually from – the Dalai Lama. Although he had not endorsed Tibetan separatism and had up until 1999 maintained a largely apolitical position, the Karmapa’s escape was quickly construed as an overtly political act and strongly condemned by Chinese state authorities (Barnett 2012).

The Karmapa’s dramatic and high profile escape from Tibet has been widely documented but the effect that it had on Mustang’s local populations has received far less attention. In conversations with several families that hosted the young man during his first days of exile, I was told that the effort to get the Karmapa safely through and out of Mustang was urgent, top secret, and well coordinated. The Karmapa generally took lodging in the shrine rooms of well-to-do families, and offerings and dedications to his presence – or kundun – remain in place today. One host recalled, “We were honored to help, but it was dangerous. If China had known anything, they would have come to take him back!” While many families expressed similar pride and gratitude for the opportunity to assist such an illustrious figure at a critical moment, they also acknowledge that it inaugurated yet another turn in border management between Mustang and Tibet, and one particularly orchestrated and enforced from the Chinese side.

An incident of embarrassment for the Chinese Communist Party, the Karmapa’s escape inspired Chinese state authorities to fence the border beginning in 1999. Constructed over the
course of approximately one year by the Chinese military, the fence stands as a conspicuous state structure in only select sections of the larger 1111-kilometer China-Nepal border. At Mustang-Tibet, the fence presents a physical barrier to trans-border movement for approximately 22.2 kilometers across the Kora La, geographically located between adjacent mountain ridgelines that pose more natural barriers to foot or motor traffic. Although the fence itself is barely visible in satellite imagery available on Google Earth, a well-worn path created by Chinese APF motor patrols is apparent immediately parallel to the fence. Several surveillance installations are also visible in satellite imagery, particularly at the main gate of the fence at coordinates 29°19'50.47"N, 83°57'52.24"E as well as closer to the western and eastern ends of the fence. Both on land and from the sky, rather than open grasslands and alpine steams, it is concrete pillars, barbed wire, solar panels, and closed circuit cameras that characterize the Mustang-Tibet border today.

*Figure 3.5 Nepal-China border fence at Kora La*

Source: Photo by author (June 2015)
Fences are state infrastructures of containment that facilitate control and symbolize the overlapping connections between sovereignty, territory, and ethnic identity. An infrastructural installation that addresses Chinese political anxieties over Tibetan state subjects as well as exile populations, the fence exerts external state power over the mobility and livelihoods of both Tibetan and Nepali populations. Outside of border areas that are divided by major rivers and/or host significant road traffic – such as Kodari-Zhangmu and Rasuwa-Kyirong – reports indicate that security fences exist along the Nepal-China border only where there are significant populations of ethnically Tibetan citizens of Nepal and/or Tibetan refugee communities, such as Mustang. Reproducing divisions between Mustang and Tibet from erstwhile boundary policy to modern territorial practice, the fence transformed a demarcated boundary into a solidified border structure in accordance with delimitations established by the 1961 Boundary Treaty.

This advanced regulation and solidification of the Nepal-China border has effectively foreclosed pastoralists’ and traders’ ability to carry out long-standing livelihoods according to seasonal migrations and exchange patterns. Yak herders with whom I spent time in the high pastures above Nyechung said that the fence severely disrupts their mobility and negatively affects the health of their herds and the pastures as well as their social relations. When asked what exactly is harder about herding today, they responded, “everything is more difficult now!” No longer able to conveniently cross the border to the north and bring their yak to graze on the Tibetan side of the Kora La, Sonam and Pemba now travel further west into the grasslands of Dolpo for summer pasturing. In addition to the demands of longer travel distances, the higher numbers of livestock sent to graze in Dolpo rather than Tibet also added significant strain to the health of the pastures and generated new territorial politics for regional pasturing. In the face of
changing grazing patterns, these pastoralists acknowledged that the fence has forced renegotiations on rangeland access for communities in Mustang and Dolpo as well as Tibet.

For those accustomed to trade-based and religious livelihoods, the fence and enforced border closure has also disrupted traditional rights of access and trans-border social relations. Numerous informants referenced how previous generations in Mustang went to Tibet multiple times per year just to trade. As a monk named Migma told me, “My father, when he was young, would go to Tibet and sell shoes, socks, nail cutters, and things…(he would) sell or trade in China to Tibetans and bring wool back (to make carpets and aprons). He would go two to three times every year. And up until the 1990s, lamas also studied in Tibet and then they would bring back metal instruments from there – bells, dorjes (symbolic thunder bolts), and other ritual things.” Members of younger generations also said their relatives had made great pilgrimages to Lhasa and Mt Kailas, but that they had never had a chance. Several informants recalled stories from their fathers and grandfathers about making routine trips to Tibet, including going for scheduled trade fairs as well as more ad hoc ventures to barter for salt, wool, tea, and meat as well as goats. After returning with these goods to Mustang and leaving the consumables with their families, Lo-ba traders would then make the two-week journey to Beni and Baglung to sell the goats. In contrast to these longstanding and long-distance practices, travel to Tibet for nearly everyone in Mustang is now made at brief and scheduled intervals for the semi-annual tsongra trade fairs. While the tsongra trade is discussed at length in the following chapter, it is important to note here that the fence effectively proscribes more widespread and informal mobility between Mustang and Tibet and conditions today’s terms of border performativity.

In addition to the fence, however, social networks also reinforce ranges of (im)mobility for Mustang’s populations. Unlike most of his monastery – but like his father – Migma admitted
that he had been to Tibet. However, his ability to visit approximately one decade before was made possible by a European friend who sponsored his visit, and their pilgrimage to Lhasa was made from Kathmandu and the Arniko-Friendship Highway via Kodari-Zhangmu instead of directly from Mustang. Without international connections like Migma’s, and unlike their forefathers’ generations, many informants explained that they had never really been to Tibet – but rather, only a few kilometers into Chinese territory in order to attend the trade fairs once or twice per year. Further acknowledging an ability to visit Tibet outside of officially regulated periods, several elite members of Mustang’s business community offered an alternative to this general narrative of containment. Determined by purchasing power as well as close connections forged with Chinese party officials during bilateral meetings in Lo Monthang during scheduled deliveries of foreign aid, Chinese gate keepers reportedly allow some of Mustang’s powerful businessmen to cross the border through the Kora La fence on a more ad hoc basis than most Lobas or other Mustangis.

The fencing of the Kora La marks a distinct practical register of bordering according to Salter’s framework. An act of unilateral political practice and enforced by Chinese border authorities rather than Nepali government officials, the fencing of Mustang finally closed and divided a trans-border space according to the prerogatives of the Chinese state. In addition to new terms of containment established by the fence, mobility for communities in Mustang is also proscribed by the suspension of trans-border rights provided to Nepal’s borderland populations according to Nepal-China border zone “exit-entry” passes. Stuck between a fence and hard place, the Border Citizenship policy (or rather, its withholding) increasingly subjects Mustang’s communities to state power on both the Chinese and Nepali sides of the border. In concert with infrastructural interventions, social stratifications, and international networks, the exceptional
case of Border Citizenship in Mustang has further curtailed and contained the historically trans-Himalayan mobile practices of regional trade, religious education, and animal husbandry for Lo-ba populations.

3.4 Exclusions and Exceptions to Nepal-China Border Citizenship in Mustang

Unlike much of what Gellner identifies as Northern South Asia (2013) – where modern borders between China, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are more direct artifacts of colonialism (Chene 2008) – Nepal’s borders have been determined, first, by customary rights and, second, through bilateral agreements with China and India (Shrestha 2013). While Mustang is a key exception, the majority of Nepal’s borders remain open – but controlled – for cross border trade, pilgrimage, animal husbandry, and other mobile practices. Operating at Salter’s practical and popular registers, this type of fluid border practice contrasts to the highly militarized borders of India, Pakistan, and China. In the case of Nepal and India, however, bilateral border policies at Salter’s formal register also allow citizens to freely cross into the other country’s sovereign space without passports or visas (Shrestha 2003). And for Nepal and China, the unique, if rather ambiguous, terms of Nepal-China Border Citizenship also enable trans-border mobility for most but not all citizens; Lo-bas and Tibetans are again exceptional cases to this border practice.

From 1956 until 2002, border agreements, treaties, and protocols between Nepal and China upheld customary rights of limited cross-border access to resources for citizens of border districts of northern Nepal and southern Tibet (Shneiderman 2013). While the Nepal-China border was largely closed during periods of upheaval during China’s Cultural Revolution, from the late 1970s onwards, the border was viewed by both states as open for border citizens to engage in trans-local trade, kinship practices, animal husbandry, and other borderland social
relations. Outlined in the 1963 *Boundary Treaty* but never formalized into official state policy, the “border citizen agreement” remains a tacit provision that allows residents of either state’s border zone to travel up to 30 kilometers into the other state’s border zone for 30-day periods.

Since the 1960s, the terms of trans-border mobility have been predicated on residential citizenship in Nepal and China’s border districts. However, countless residents of Nepal’s borderland districts have historically lacked citizenship documents. For many, this is because they either intentionally avoided or inadvertently lacked identification papers due to bureaucratic constraints and a complex registration process with district-level government offices. In large part, residents of Nepal’s borderland districts have historically not pursued or possessed documents of state citizenship because citizenship did not entail state services. In an examination of long term relationships with regulation and development in Jumla orchestrated from Kathmandu (and influenced from Delhi and Beijing), Bishop notes that “the northern border regions of Nepal were the first affected negatively by such external forces and the last helped by the central government” (1990: 156). Maintaining relative autonomy and separation from the state, avoidance of citizenship reflects Scott’s argument about the ways that borderland communities in upland South Asia intentionally resist being made legible to the state center (2009). Analyzing more recent terms of citizenship in Nepal’s Dolakha district during and following Nepal’s Maoist Civil War from 1996-2006, Shneiderman also finds that the bureaucratic processes of citizenship were viewed by many to bring one closer to a paradoxically oppressive and neglectful state (2013). While citizenship registration also conversely brings the state center closer to the peripheral borderlands, this dynamic is a more recent experience in Mustang compared with much of Nepal.
A prevailing lack of district-specific identification papers caused consistent problems for border officials in the management of cross-border movement between Nepal and China. In response to this complication, in 2002 a new Nepal-China border agreement was established that introduced the “Entry/Exit Pass Card for Nepal-China Border Citizens” (Adhikārī 2010: 242). In order to gain a Border Citizen entry-exit pass, applicants are required to prove state-recognized citizenship to a border district. For applicants without the requisite citizenship documents, Nepali citizenship must first “be made” (nagarikta banaune) by showing evidence of parental (and in most cases paternal) citizenship as well as land-ownership in the district of application (Shneiderman 2013: 32). While at first glance this citizenship policy appears relatively straightforward, in practice it is anything but simple due to the widespread lack of birth certificates and formal titles for land holdings in much of rural, highland Nepal. This is not to say that births and property ownership are not routinely recorded, but rather to point out that such documentation is more commonly made by local, customary practice instead of more formal and bureaucratic registrations of births and land holdings with Government of Nepal district offices. However, as a result of the creation and production of the Border Citizen entry-exit pass, unprecedented numbers of Nepal’s highland population have become enrolled in new bureaucratic systems of the state.

The Border Citizen agreement and entry-exit passes simultaneously established new terms of mobility across the Nepal-China border and institutionalized new standards of containment for residents (both citizens and non-citizens alike) of proximate districts. For example, between Rasuwa and Kyirong or Kodari and Nyalam, local residents have long been accustomed to crossing the border on a routine basis. So long as individuals were able to collect and provide identification papers, the creation of the entry-exit passes enshrined trans-border
rights and enabled the maintenance of mobile livelihoods based on trade and commerce. However, the standardization of the entry-exit passes has to a significant degree foreclosed mobile privileges for citizens of non-border districts – such as Nuwakot – for whom trans-border access had been historically possible even when no identification could be produced. Moreover, the requirement of entry-exit passes also limits the mobile privileges for residents of border districts who are unable to provide the necessary documentation to gain district-level identification. Countless residents of the Nepal-China borderlands use their Border Citizen pass to engage in quotidian trans-border economic activity.

*Figure 3.6 ‘Entry-Exit’ Pass Card for Nepal China Border Citizen*

Source: Photo by author (December 2014)

At the Kodari-Zhangmu border at Dolakha-Sindhupalchok as well as the Rasuwa-Kyirong border, this policy shapes commercial livelihoods for many trans-local communities. Up until the 2015 earthquakes, local Nepali citizens at the Kodari-Zhangmu border could cross the Friendship Bridge multiple times per day to purchase wholesale manufactured goods in the bazaars and
markets on the China side in the market of Zhangmu (also known as Dram or Khasa). Allowed to import a load as large as could be carried on one’s back without incurring import taxes or customs duties, residents of the district commonly traveled to the markets five or six times per day to source the goods that stock the shelves of their roadside stores.

Figure 3.7 Nepali women porter purchases from Zhangmu’s Tibetan market to shops in Kodari

Source: Photo by author (December 2014)

During the days I spent exploring the markets of both Zhangmu and Kodari, I spoke with numerous Nepalis who said their incomes were almost totally dependent on the Border Citizen entry-exit passes. “All of my business comes from Tibet,” a local Sherpa woman explained to me on a rainy day in the Kodari bazaar. A serious entrepreneur who challenged the male-dominated China-Nepal export-import industry, she had boys loading trucks for her in the Zhangmu market and girls holding her umbrella while she awaited the vehicles’ arrival. “It is big business, and I import to Kathmandu, not just Sindupalchok.” Tamang and Thangmi women also explained that they made as many trips as possible per day over the Friendship Bridge and into the Zhangmu wholesale market, carrying prodigious loads of Chinese-made blankets and shoes as well as
noodles and biscuits on their backs from the Tibetan side back to their shops in Kodari and the lower town of Tatopani.

Figures 3.8 Nepali and Tibetan stevedores in Zhangmu offloading Chinese cargo and resting

Source: Photos by author (December 2014)
Many local Nepali and Tibetan men and women also worked as daily stevedores alongside Tibetan laborers on the upper side of Zhangmu town, offloading massive cargo trucks that lined up with goods for export into Nepal. In this bazaar, Tibetans from Tingri mixed with Thangmis from Dolakha; other workers included Newaris from Kathmandu and Tharus from the Terai region of southern Nepal, both of who managed to get across the Nepal-China border at the Friendship Bridge between Kodari and Zhangmu without having border citizen status (it is also key to note that these lowland Nepalis were laborers but not traders or significant buyers at the Zhangmu market). A gainful site for domestic migrant labor, dozens of large Chinese cargo trucks were offloaded on a daily basis and the goods shifted to smaller Nepali lorries for transport to the central markets of Kathmandu.

This dynamic is but one reflection of the ways in which borders function as resources, places of accumulation, and their own machines of mobility and not just structures of containment. A young Nepali in his early 20s, Prashant works as a middleman in the export-import sector, running paperwork, navigating border bureaucracies, and coordinating offloading and vehicle transport across the Friendship Bridge. He explained how important and financially gainful border citizenship is for local communities, especially in the view of economically oriented younger generations. “If I didn’t have the Border Citizen pass, what would I do? This is the best business around. I have a motorcycle, and girlfriends here and in Kathmandu also. I am lucky to be from here, but I also work hard. Not everyone can do this. But it is very good for me!” For Prashant, the border and his access across it constitutes a powerful vehicle of social and economic mobility.

The 2015 earthquakes in Nepal dramatically changed economic livelihoods and border practices in Kodari-Zhangmu for people like Prashant as well as Tibetan and Nepali stevedores
and day traders. Immediately after the first earthquake, cargo imports into Nepal ceased because of significant damage to the Arniko-Friendship Highway as well as the Friendship Bridge. Moreover, devastation to Zhangmu town was so severe that Chinese authorities evacuated the entire population and resettled the community in a camp for internally displaced persons (IDP) in Shigatse, Tibet’s second largest city. Lacking the social and infrastructural basis for sustained trade, trans-border economic systems and daily livelihood practices remain suspended at the time of writing, as there is no longer a viable export-import route from China to Nepal along the Arniko-Friendship Highway. Although reports indicate that small numbers of the Zhangmu community have started to return from the Shigatse-based IDP camp, there is still an inadequate infrastructural basis for reviving trade and cross-border business between Kodari and Zhangmu.

Border citizenship also shapes trans-border livelihoods in Rasuwa, and its importance to local communities has increased dramatically since the Nepal earthquakes. As the development of a new dry port proceeds in the town of Timure, profits soar alongside the acceleration of cross-border traffic. A significant shift in trade began with the opening of the Kyirong-Rasuwa Road in 2014 and rapidly expanded with the closure of the Kodari-Zhangmu border and Arniko-Friendship Highway. Although a small bazaar exists on the Chinese side of the Rasuwa-Kyirong border, the larger market for wholesale buying is located 24 kilometers into Chinese Tibet at the historic town of Kyirong. Today, many male residents of Rasuwa District rent their Border Citizen pass to licensed drivers of cargo trucks and in so doing can earn up to NRs 50,000 per day ($500), an astronomical daily yield in rural Nepal. As natal and residential place enables both spatial and economic mobility for citizens of Rasuwa, border citizenship has generated new

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4 Personal communication with Gen. Sir Sam Cowan, Summer 2015.
capital relations based on trans-border import trade that present both lucrative outcomes and social disruptions across the district.

Markers of exclusion and containment for Lo-ba and Tibetan populations, ethnicity and place are key considerations that factor into both China and Nepal’s *ad hoc* management of the rights to border citizenship. Despite identification of the 30-kilometer border zone in the 1964 *Trade Agreement* and subsequent creation of the Nepal-China Border Citizen agreement, the lived experiences of communities in Mustang (and much of Tibet) are exceptionally different from those of other Nepali or Chinese borderland populations in Rasuwa, Sindupalchowk, and southern China. For example, ethnic Tibetans of China are generally unable to exit China and freely cross into Nepal for petty trade almost anywhere along the 1111-kilometer Nepal-China border. When I asked why the privileges of border citizenship do not apply to most Tibetans, I was told by Nepal’s Border Commissioner to Mustang that the prohibition is largely a consequence of China’s effort to control the movement of Tibetan populations and, more importantly, to reduce the outmigration of Tibetan exiles. Conversely, China’s Sherpa (Xierba) groups – linguistically and culturally related to Tibetans but ethnically distinct and classified as an altogether different minority population – are generally granted border citizenship rights and allowed to travel from their home areas around Nyalam and Zhangmu into Nepal without complications (Shneiderman 2013). This allowance of border citizenship mobility is made precisely because Chinese Sherpa/Xierba are *not* Tibetan and, as such, due not present the same concerns for Chinese authorities with regards to separatism and exile politics. In addition to Sherpa/Xierba, ethnic Han Chinese and even some other Chinese minority groups that are citizens of the border zone, but whose ethnicity does not carry the same political sensitivity as Tibetans, can also freely travel to Nepal. As of 2015, and as I experienced routinely at the
Rasuwa-Kyirong border crossing, many Chinese citizens who are not even residents of the border zone are also now able to travel into Nepal without visas altogether (Prasain 2015).

In contrast to trade livelihoods and local political economies at Kodari-Zhangmu and Rasuwa-Kyirong, border citizenship at the Mustang-Tibet border is altogether different and largely a practice of containment rather than mobility. While the entry-exit passes are ostensibly available to citizens of Nepal in all districts that border China, they have been systematically denied to and unavailable for citizens of Mustang (as well as for residents of Nepal’s other Tibetan-speaking districts such as Dolpo). When I asked Mustang’s Resident Border Commissioner why border citizenship did not apply in Mustang and why nobody seemed to possess government-issued Border Citizen entry-exit passes, he initially demurred, and then diplomatically acknowledged “because of China and the Khampas.” While the legacy of Tibetan resistance in Mustang suggests an easy explanation for why Nepal and China would keep the Mustang-Tibet border closed, it is also true that the border policy is more complex and consistent with a longer history of mobility and containment across the region. Although the Border Commissioner would not give me any more details, many locals were willing to talk more about the exceptional case of border citizenship in Mustang. A businessman in Tsarang expressed his frank perspective to me, “we are like Tibetans, so China does not let us cross. We are not like other Nepalis, who can go hither and thither. China wants to control us, like they control Tibet.”

Key to the difference in Nepali and Chinese management of border citizenship for populations of Mustang and Tibet, as compared to other populations and ethnic groups, is that neither state is obligated to treat all border citizens the same way in all places. Specifically, exceptions to the rights and privileges of border citizenship are an artifact of similar provisions for exclusion codified in the 1966 Agreement on Trade, Intercourse and Related Questions
between TAR of China and Nepal. In eight Articles, the 1966 Agreement outlines the ways that trade relations are to be maintained between Kathmandu and Beijing. Article I outlines the provisions that govern the movement of parties and personnel between the two countries, including diplomats, civil servants, border inhabitants, traders, religious believers, porters and muleteers, and other government officials and pilgrims. However, Article I, Number 8 specifies “Notwithstanding the provisions of the foregoing paragraphs of this Article, either Government may refuse entry in its territory to any particular person, should it deem this necessary” (Jain 1981: 388). Building on the 1956 Agreement to Maintain the Friendly Relations between the People’s Republic of China and the Kingdom of Nepal and on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet Region of China and Nepal, the 1966 Agreement was first extended for ten years to 1976, and then, following subsequent exchanges of diplomatic letters, further incorporated into the 2002 Border Citizenship agreement (Jain 1981: 386). By expanding the jurisdictional right to “refuse entry in its territory” from a person to a population, the border regimes of both Nepal and China can duly deny trans-border mobility to border citizens of Mustang and Tibet.

The suspension of the rights and privileges of border citizenship that remain available to Nepal’s other (and especially non-Tibetan speaking) border citizens makes the Nepal-China border regime at Mustang-Tibet a relatively exceptional case in the management of the Nepali borderlands. Nepal’s western, southern, and eastern borders with India have an open border policy (Shrestha 2013), and much of Nepal’s border with China is also open in a unique but limited basis for Nepal-China Border Citizens; however, the Mustang-Tibet border, along with the Sino-Nepal border in neighboring districts of Dolpo and Manang, does not allow the same flexible arrangement for populations that are generally identified as ethnically Tibetan. This distinction of bordering in Mustang marks a key contrast to the experience of border citizens that
Shneiderman, for example, encounters in Dolakha-Sindupalchok. Whereas Shneiderman sees an “alternative mode of belonging for some citizens of Nepal, whose shared positionality as a resident of the border zone enables a different set of opportunities than those experienced by their counterparts residing elsewhere in either country” (2013: 26), communities in Mustang are accustomed to an altogether different experience. While the policies and experiences of border citizenship in Mustang are unusual when compared to other Nepali border districts, they are nevertheless consistent with and reflect similar Chinese policies over Tibetan populations across the TAR (W. Smith 2008).

The denial of border citizenship rights in Mustang and withholding of privileges according to the entry-exit passes can be interpreted through Salter’s popular register of border performativity – or the everyday forms of experience, resistance, and contestation that reproduce the border. Starting with the 1999 fencing of the Mustang-Tibet border and then compounded in 2002 with the establishment and immediate denial of mobility privileges offered to other Border Citizen groups, communities in Mustang remain unable to cross into Chinese Tibet outside of officially regulated periods for trade fairs and other state-sanctioned events. Enabled by provisions codified by the 1966 Agreement on Trade, Intercourse, and Related Questions and not unlike the uniquely restrictive regulations placed on mobility for Tibetan communities in China, the suspension of the rights to border citizenship in Mustang underscores the exceptional case by which the district and its citizens are managed and just one of the ways that the border is continually performed between Nepal and China.

3.5 Conclusion

Because borders are in a constant state of “materialization, dematerialization, and rematerialization” (Megoran 2012), border biographies provide insight into the ways in which
borders affect, disrupt, and shape everyday life for borderland populations. The constant negotiation and performance of a border furthermore helps define relationships between borderland populations and state centers. Towards a richer border biography for Nepal and China, this chapter follows the delimitation, demarcation, construction, and solidification of the Mustang-Tibet border. This process entails an ongoing and unfolding trajectory from international agreements, treaties, and protocols through iterative stages of boundary marking and border fencing up to more recent state policies that regulate and manage trans-border mobility and containment on the basis of citizenship and ethnicity. Today, exceptional state policies and new bureaucracies mediate access and exclusion between Mustang and Tibet, especially the non-observance of the official Nepal-China Border Citizen entry-exit pass. However, trans-local terms of mobility and containment are also shaped by Mustang’s unique history and particular location within broader Nepal-Tibet-China geopolitical and geographical arrangements. As Shneiderman identifies with regards to the intersection of borders and geographical imaginaries, “political relations between Nepal and China, and more specifically the management of mobility across the two countries’ Himalayan borders, play a powerful role in constituting contemporary imaginations of the Nepali nation state and its geopolitical importance” (2013: 27).

In the case of Mustang, it is important to note that identity is widely articulated first and foremost as a socio-cultural connection to Tibet above and beyond a political or economic connection to Nepal. That is, heritages and materialities of Tibetan-ness are commonly referenced across Mustang as distinct social and cultural markers that constitute a non-state form of national identity. Rigzin, a 20-something shopkeeper, explained the material basis for this trans-border identification over a cup of tea in his family’s storefront in Lo Monthang. The
conversation on identity and Tibetan-ness came up after I asked him why the vast majority of goods in his shop were largely identical to items I had seen in the Tibetan bazaars of Lhasa and Kathmandu. “Here in Mustang, we have always used and liked the same things as Tibetans. These things – ritual implements, prayer flags, thangkas (Tibetan Buddhist painted scrolls), and statues – are really Tibetan, but they are also Mustangi, because they are important to us, too.” When I pointed out that I was well aware that his wares were mostly manufactured in Patan or Kathmandu, and not Tibet as was generally advertised, he used my comment to make a switch to the shared practices of Tibetans and Lo-bas. “You are right, this stuff comes from Patan and Boudha, just like the things you’ll find at the Barkhor. Just like our böd cha (Tibetan tea) and tsampa, we like the same things as Tibetan. That’s because we once were Tibetan. And we still are more Tibetan than Nepali.”

While marking a communal connection across the border with his brethren Tibetans, Rigzin also indexed the differential identity that Lo-bas articulate with respect to most Nepalis. Such an identity marker maintains a certain us-them attitude, expressed by referring to lowland Nepalis as rongba, considerations of trips to Pokhara or Kathmandu as “going to Nepal,” and the continuation of social and economic connections with Tibetan communities in China despite the formation of the border fence and other state-led boundary practices. Therefore, in contrast to Cerdanya and other borderland regions where “frontier regions are privileged sites for the articulation of national distinctions” (Sahlins 1989: 271), Mustang-Tibet is characterized by powerful and lasting cultural connections that mark Lo-ba and Tibetan communities on the other side of the border as significantly closer to one another than their respective national

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5 The Barkhor is the historical religious, social, and commercial center of Lhasa where a majority of ‘Tibetan’ items – ritual objects and souvenirs alike – come from Kathmandu and are sold to both foreign and Chinese tourists as well as local Tibetan consumers.
‘countrymen’ in the state capitals of Kathmandu and Beijing (or perhaps even the district and provincial centers of Jomsom and Lhasa).

Despite these differences between Cerdanya and Mustang, however, it is the ways in which boundaries and borders affect the processes of developing an identity consciousness that are most important to this study. The construction of place-based identities is inseparable to a distinct territory upon which those identities take shape. Because borderland spaces are routinely highly sensitive (Cons 2016), both the territories and identities that comprise the borderlands remain an ongoing interest of the central state. Jumping scales from inter-village rivalries to the diplomatic negotiations of international relations, “national identity is a socially constructed and continuous process of defining ‘friend’ and ‘enemy,’ a logical extension of the process of maintaining boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ within more local communities” (Sahlins 1989: 270-71). While government officials and Lo-ba farmers may mean very different things when identifying places and persons as Mustangi, both state-centric actors and local borderlanders alike reference particular places as markers of identity when making strategic claims over border territories for political and social purposes.

In a seminal ethnography of traders and mobility across trans-Himalayan borderlands, James Fisher situates the experiences of a unique (and intentionally unidentified) group of Nepal traders as neither Nepali nor Tibetan nor Chinese, but part and parcel of all. Rather than being defined by the border or as what they are not, for these communities, “the Himalayas, thus are not so much a boundary, a border, or buffer, as a zipper which stitches together these two densely textured cultural fabrics” (Fisher 1978: 2). This conceptualization of the zipper can be extended from socio-cultural identities to geopolitical experiences, particularly in the case of Mustang, and resonates with Wilson and Donnan’s description of the border as a space “within
which people negotiate a variety of behaviors and meanings associated with their membership in

By bringing history, ethnography, and textual analysis together, a biographical approach
to border studies moves beyond the limitations imposed by other border studies frameworks to
reveal borders as an infrastructural connection of social processes, material practices, and state
institutions. Combining Sahlins’s conceptualizations on borderland identities with Megoran’s
ethnographic and biographical border work and Painter’s three-part registry of border
experience, this chapter historicized the processual nature of producing a trans-Himalayan border
and examined how borders are translated and reflected into national identities that operate within
and across those very borders themselves. This approach is “sensitive to the subtle ways in which
the functions and effects of boundaries change. It illuminates how international boundaries are
both produced by and produce social life. International boundaries thus become a powerful
geographical lens through which to make visible a range of social processes that might otherwise
be overlooked” (Megoran 2012: 468).

Bridging anthropological and geopolitical analysis, the spatial operations of Chinese
extra-territorial power from Tibet to Mustang – and more importantly within Nepali state space –
进一步 reflects Shneiderman’s recognition of the border zone as “a space of overlapping
sovereignties,” (2013: 28). Not only “the place where state meets society” (Zartman 2010: 1),
borders are also the spaces where multiple states and societies intersect and overlap. As such, the
border zone is a critical juncture to examine and understand the ‘zippered’ entanglements of
place, identity, and territory. “The border zone is a space of articulation, where the categorical
imperatives of two different states intersect with agentive manipulations of identity to yield new
ethnic formulations” (Shneiderman 2013: 33).
Following my examination in the previous chapter on the production of trans-border road networks and their concomitant entanglements of mobility and containment, this border biography sets the groundwork for the next chapter’s analysis on trans-border trade and the material-territorial linkages between markets and bureaucracies for Mustang and Tibet as well as Nepal and China more broadly. Further connecting formal, practical, and popular registers of the Mustang-Tibet border, trans-border dynamics of commerce and consumption increasingly motivate the production of new Nepali state bureaucracies across Mustang. In contrast to the institutional and infrastructural containments of state closure and border fencing, social and economic relations in Mustang are being reshaped by new conditions of social and economic mobilities (and associated immobilities). As I examine in the following chapters, this transformation is visible in a multitude of forms: trans-border business and the commercialization of regional trade dynamics; high levels of out-migration from Mustang to Kathmandu and New York City; new circulations of capital fueled by Mustang’s remittance economy; and complex, uneven, and disruptive dynamics generated by international aid to Mustang. Shaped by humanitarian relief and international investments in infrastructure development, the growth of Chinese political and economic interventions in Mustang presents significant and yet uncertain implications for Lo-bas’ and their every shifting experiences with social change and state formation across the trans-Himalaya.
Chapter 4

Goods

“Everything is now money, it’s not trade!”

Consumption, bureaucracy, territory

What is a Tibetan goat worth in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands today? How about a pair of Nepali-made sneakers, or an Indian-made watch? For centuries, the exchange value of a goat between Mustang and Tibet could be measured in barley or other cereal grains from the central and lower Himalaya. Although the trade of these goods took place on a routine basis, exchange concentrated around the region’s semi-annual trade fairs, or tsongra, held for several weeks every spring and fall immediately after and before the planting and harvest seasons, respectively. Fattened by summer pasturing on the Tibetan Plateau, thousands of goats and sheep were acquired by barter and brought south every autumn by trans-Himalayan traders for widespread Hindu sacrifices for the Nepalese Kingdom’s annual Dasain festival in October.

Twenty-some years ago, shoes entered as a new medium of exchange for goats, such that one animal at the tsongra became equivalent to one pair of Nepali-made Gold Star sneakers. Produced in Kathmandu, these sneakers have long been standard and affordable athletic footwear across the country, popular both on urban streets and rural pathways as well as the training grounds for the Nepali Army. In Kathmandu’s retail markets during the 1990s, Gold Stars sold for less than 100 Nepali Rupees (NRs) per pair (US$ 1). ¹ Away from the capital city, the sneakers assumed a greater exchange value, and the cash prices for Gold Stars in the central markets of Jomsom, the capital of Mustang, have generally been 100-200% higher than

¹ Prices are adjusted for inflation and reflect approximate current values.
Kathmandu’s rates. And at the tsongra, formerly far from the cash markets of central Nepal and Tibet, manufactured sneakers had an even greater value – they were worth a good goat. However, this goat-Gold Star trade is no longer practiced, and cash now mediates exchange relations across the Mustang-Tibet borderlands.

*Figure 4.1 New models of Gold Star sneakers in Nepali bazaar*

![New models of Gold Star sneakers in Nepali bazaar](Photo by author (January 2016)).

Watches, especially those with large, ornate faces manufactured in central India, have long been popular products at the tsongra as well. Until recent years, watches were also traded on a barter basis, but like Gold Stars and goats, they are now bought and sold with cash. Especially popular with Tibetan nomads and Khampa traders from eastern Tibet, the watches sell for NRs 3000-4000 (US $30-40) in Kathmandu; resale at the trade fairs typically claims a 200-300% markup. During the winter months in Kathmandu, Lo-ba traders buy these watches in urban markets specifically for future resale and today they are one of the few products that Lo-bas sell at the tsongra. Other Nepali (and Indian) products sold at the trade fairs include ritual
implements made in Kathmandu (or Patan) for household and monastic religious practice, the occasional thangka or religious painting, surplus dry goods such as flour and Nepali rice, and yartsa gumbu, the valuable caterpillar fungus harvested in the high Himalaya and widely in demand for Chinese medicine and gift economies. More important to note than what is sold by Lo-bas, however, is that very little from Nepal is sold at all. The export-import current has become nearly one directional between Tibet and Mustang – exports from China and imports to Nepal – and the exchanges today are made almost entirely via cash.

Although it is well documented that money has long circulated throughout the trans-Himalaya (Bishop 1990; van Spengen 2000; Harris 2013), the creation of a tourism industry in Mustang in the 1990s coupled with pervasive outmigration and associated remittance incomes has generated a purchasing power that shapes new terms and scales of cash-based relations for the region’s populations. Cash flows across Mustang and other borderland districts have deepened as a result of new road infrastructures and state policies that collectively encourage and facilitate trade growth between Chinese Tibet and highland Nepal. Initially accelerated by the creation of the tourism economy in the early-1990s and more recently augmented by cash injections from outside the district, capital circulations grow annually between Mustang and both Tibet and central Nepal. Characterized by new cash-based social-economic relations and practices of conspicuous consumption, this capital moves through the purchase and sale of Chinese commodities and the reinvestment of revenues in tourist lodges, restaurants, shops, and vehicles. Moreover, this growing capital circulation has also generated particular and uneven accumulations that in turn motivate distinct bureaucratic responses from the Nepali state.

This chapter examines trade in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands to show the ways in which the border is itself a resource and to see how the management of border trade requires
bureaucratic infrastructures that advance state formation. As a kind of machine that enables mobility for some people (and things) but places limits and containments on that mobility for others, the administration of the Mustang-Tibet border is constitutive to the practices and performance of bordering while it also facilitates certain processes of accumulation and regulation. Privileging particular kinds of movements but stopping others, new border regimes channel both financial and physical movements into new configurations of control. By analyzing the connections between cross-border trade, shifting consumer habits, and the creation of new bureaucratic institutions in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands, this chapter argues that new formations of the Nepali state can be seen and understood as processes of territorialization made in response to material practices of everyday consumption. To make this argument, I utilize a material-territorial analytic that combines Corbridge et al.’s (2005) conceptualization of everyday ways to ‘see the state’ with Painter’s (2006, 2010) theorization of the administrative effects by which the state takes shape and operates through new bureaucratic regulations and institutions.

An analytical connection between material culture (Williams 1977; Hetherington 2007) and territoriality (Agnew and Corbridge 2002; Elden 2007) frames my understanding of how the circulation and consumption of everyday things is linked to processes of state formation. That is, I make a material-territorial analysis to connect the quotidian practices of trade and consumerism – what people buy, sell, eat, and ship – with the distinct ways that state bureaucracies are mobilized to control these circulations and associated political economies through taxation and regulation. This is an especially important process to examine in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands, where new infrastructures of roads and fences have contributed to livelihood transformations and new trade systems and consumption practices have motivated the creation of new state
institutions. It is by looking at these dynamics that the border can be seen as a resource itself, as both a means and mode of accumulation. Thus a view to borderland markets – as specific places of buying and selling (like the tsongra) as well as the social relationships that enable circulations of capital and networks of exchange – shows further how infrastructures take shape in scalar and fractal ways, building upon and expanding one another, from roads and fences to customs houses and tax policies.

After a brief overview of local experiences with tourism and development in Mustang, in this chapter I analyze how infrastructures (re)configure new political economies and bureaucratic formations across the Mustang-Tibet borderlands in three key contexts. This includes: 1) cash, consumption, and tourism vis-à-vis ongoing shifts from barter-based to cash-based exchange relations between Mustang and Tibet; 2) tsongra, taxation, and transport with respect to commercializing trade practices and Chinese regulations over the tsongra; and 3) regulation as mobility and containment according to the Nepali state’s implementation of new customs requirements over motorcycles and local strategies of circumvention. By analyzing new bureaucratic controls over the movement of goods, money, and people across borderland space, this chapter shows how material practices motivate territorial processes and the ways in which new regulations and capital accumulations inspire multiple actors with both competing and complementary interests to renegotiate border infrastructures (Walker 1999).

4.1 Connecting Trade and Territory through Consumption

The increasing consumption of commodity imports across Mustang contributes to new circulations of capital that reshape social relations throughout the borderlands and catalyze institutional interventions of the Nepali state. Since the 1990s, cash currency and manufactured
commodities have caused a shift in the relationships that form the basis for political economic systems at the tsongra and within wider networks of exchange across the trans-Himalaya. Rather than bringing large volumes of products to trade and/or sell, most Lo-bas from Mustang carry cash to buy consumables for both personal use and resale across the district. Motorcycles, machine-made carpets, synthetic blankets, foam pillows, metal stoves, plywood furniture, polyester clothing, vacuum thermoses, packaged noodles, crackers, juice, beer, and liquor – Chinese goods, bought in Tibet – have become ubiquitous in domestic, touristic, and commercial spaces throughout Mustang today. Moreover, while goats and Gold Stars no longer maintain an equivalent value and money largely mediates engagements between everyday consumers in Nepal and wholesale traders in Tibet, tax officials posted from Kathmandu now generate state revenue by levying duties over increasing volumes of Chinese-manufactured commodity imports.

Contemporary trade and consumption habits between Mustang and Tibet reveal close linkages between Lo-ba and Tibetan cultural practices, trans-Himalayan geographic imaginaries, and Nepal-China relations. The consumption and circulation of Tibetan-made goods in Mustang was historically common, domestic spaces are still strongly Tibetan in character, and the everyday use of material things – from tea churms to Tibetan horses to women’s aprons – represent socio-spatial practices that express and maintain many Lo-bas’ inextricable cultural links to Tibet. As consumption is a cultural practice entangled with the mobility of particular things, consumerism in Mustang is itself a reflection of Lo-ba and Tibetan as well as other trans-Himalayan geographical imaginaries.

Writing on the links between consumer practice and cultural expression in terms of trans-Himalayan geographical imaginaries in the Indo-Tibetan borderlands, Tina Harris (2008) demonstrates how unique and temporally particular preferences for a specific good – be it
synthetic silk or a Tibetan yak tail – locate the consumer both geographically in a place and materially in a trans-local cultural context. In Mustang, material linkages and expressions to and of Tibet include, for example, the inclusion within all homes of Tibetan Buddhist shrine rooms and domestic spaces decorated with photos of Sakya rinpoches and other high-ranking lamas. Of course, as in Tibet, this also means that homes in Mustang are increasingly choc a bloc with Chinese things as well – from electric tea churners and manufactured metal kitchen stoves to cheap dishware, synthetic cushions and carpets, and satellite-fed televisions playing entertainment produced in Chinese Tibet.

![Figure 4.2 A typical central room in a Mustang home](image)

Source: Photo by author (June 2015).

While traditional Tibetan goods like tea, salt, butter, and meat are still carried over the China-Nepal border into Mustang, the bulk of imports to the district are manufactured Chinese products. As these products are moved with and by new transport systems, cash flows, and

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2 In this kitchen room, the stove, synthetic carpets, cushions, pillows, tables, thermos, and dishware are all made in China. The pots, buckets, and kettle are made in India and/or Nepal. Television and cabinet, also of Chinese manufacture, are out of view.
commodity choices, Mustang’s traders, merchants, and everyday consumers are re-positioned in social arrangements increasingly oriented by capitalist logics for globalized products made in distant manufacturing centers of eastern China. Moreover, the sheer volume of manufactured products brought directly from the tsongra into Mustang has generated an altogether new bureaucratic response from the Government of Nepal across the district.

Consumers are central participants in capitalist systems (Hetherington 2007) and make a key link between the circulation of capital and state territoriality. Consumption is a cultural practice based on relationships of exchange where social actors and material things converge. A fundamental and conspicuous aspect of everyday life, consumption practice in capitalist political economies is strongly conditioned by purchasing power and mediated by monetary transactions (e.g. specie, cash, or credit). In Mustang, agriculture and animal husbandry subsidizes more recent capitalist relations of commodity exchange, and both capital and money have long circulated throughout the region. While Dodd (2014) shows that money has long been incorporated into many non-capitalist systems, the increasing monetization of relations between Mustang and Tibet represents an important way that the region is being penetrated by capitalist relations, and central to those relations is consumer practice. While neither consumption practices nor monetized relations are exclusive to capitalism, this chapter specifically examines how consumption is both a material process and a social interaction that drives and expands commercialized trade relations and consequently motivates bureaucratic responses of state regulation and territorialization.

For the purposes of this chapter, I deploy Sack’s definition of territoriality as a spatial strategy to “affect, influence, or control actions, interactions, or access by asserting and attempting to enforce control over a specific geographic area” (1983: 55). Building on Sack’s
theorization, Vangergeest and Peluso argue for closer attention to a geographically internal territorialization, showing that “territorialization is about excluding or including people within particular geographic boundaries, and about controlling what people do and their access to natural resources within those boundaries” (1995: 388). Adding to this line of territorial thinking, Painter sees state territorialization as an ‘effect’ of distinct socio-technical practices such as accounting and other networked bureaucracies (2006, 2010). Drawing from these studies, my analysis of territorialization and state formation in Nepal looks specifically at the ways in which state institutions – deployed as mechanisms like Painter’s bureaucratic effects – are formed in response to and in order to control cross-border and international circulations of capital.

Located in a place long considered peripheral to the Kathmandu center, Mustang’s position with respect to the Nepali state is undergoing abrupt change. Since the late 18th century, when Mustang was formally incorporated into Nepal’s ruling Gorkhali Kingdom, through the democratic reforms of the late 20th century, both the physical infrastructures and perceived presence of the Nepali state have been extremely limited in Mustang: the district was not connected to the national electricity grid, there were no motorized roads, state-run schools were characterized by delinquent teachers, and government bureaucrats maintained offices in (and limited their actual residence to) the district capital of Jomsom, a multi-day journey to the south from the historical political and cultural capital of Lo Monthang.

After prohibitions on foreign travel to Mustang were lifted in the early 1990s, state presence began to assume a new profile across the district, primarily as officialdom implemented to manage and profit from high cost, state-sanctioned tourism to the district. Established in 1986 by the National (formerly King Mahendra) Trust for Nature Protection (NTNC), the Annapurna Conservation Area Project was formed to mediate tourism and protect Mustang’s fragile alpine
landscapes and ‘unique cultural heritage.’ This ‘conservation’ primarily happened by limiting visitor numbers to Mustang through the imposition of exceptionally high fees for trekking permits (initially $1000 per person per week, now $500 per person for ten days). While NTNC is officially a national NGO, ACAP in fact facilitated an early form of state intervention and revenue generation in Mustang through the management of government-issued trekking permits and visitor fees to both the national park and restricted zone of Upper Mustang. While national park administrators and government check posts remain located at strategic points throughout Mustang, it is the transformation of local consumption practices that has more recently created the conditions for a shift in Nepali bureaucratic administration from regulation over foreign visitors to taxation of the district’s citizens.

*Figure 4.3 Existing customs and quarantine house at Nyechung*

Source: Photo by author (April 2015).

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3 Unless one obtains special permission from Nepal’s Ministry of Home Affairs, it is only possible for foreigners to visit Mustang with these highly expensive permits. Through relationships between Nepal’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the US Embassy in Kathmandu and through interventions of the US Fulbright Program in Nepal (USEF), I was able to obtain an extended and special *gratis* permit for Mustang for April-June 2015. However, the 2015 earthquakes and disruption to my research schedule significantly reduced the advantages of these permits, and the 3-6 month application process (and waiting period) made it impossible for me to obtain new ‘special’ permits.
New state institutions in Mustang include the first Government of Nepal Border Commissioner to maintain residence in Lo Monthang as well as new assignments for regional tax officers. Beyond administrators and technocrats, new physical infrastructures also include expansions to the Government of Nepal’s Customs and Quarantine Houses in Mustang as well as the planned construction of barracks just below the Kora La for new squadrons of Nepal’s paramilitary Armed Police Force (Report 2016). Pointing further towards an international agenda that could make Mustang the newest trade corridor between China and Nepal, feasibility studies commenced in 2015 for the construction of a major dry port in Nyechung, the first permanent village below the Kora La (Tripathi 2016), and land for this major infrastructure project was recently secured by the government from land owners in Upper Mustang (Giri 2017).

*Figure 4.4 China-Nepal export-import dryport under construction at Tatopani*

Source: Photo by author (February 2015).
The vision for Mustang’s new trade-storage facility is made on the basis of similar infrastructures currently under development in Tatopani and Rasuwaghadi, the main borderland depots along the oldest and newest transport corridors between Nepal and China, respectively. Anticipating and encouraging greater cash flows, commodity circulations, and capital accumulation across the district, this dry-port and the subsequent Nepali state effects of tax officials, quarantine officers, currency traders, and security details comprises a territorial process made to expand, accelerate, and control trans-border trade that will both impact and be impacted by the material basis of trans-local consumer practices.

In looking at the ways in which citizens and the state interact – or at how to see the operations, assemblages, and practices that comprise what might be called the state – Corbridge et al.’s work on governance and governmentality in India (2005) interrogates and problematizes official stories about the state and development. The authors undertake an anthropological examination of the state to show how a citizen actually experiences – or sees – the state through a prism that comprises the processes and positionalities of subject formation. Beginning with a view from the bottom and moving across variegated levels of dispossessed and marginalized citizens, government officials, and development workers in modern India, Corbridge et al. see the state as dispersed practices of government and show that “states are best thought of as bundles of everyday institutions and forms of rule” (2005: 5). Following Corbridge et al.’s argument that the state be seen as a complex configuration of bureaucratic actors, administrative policies, and normalized practices, in the sections below I examine how communities in Mustang see the state and help to configure its formation through their everyday experiences with (and circumventions of) new national institutions and regulatory systems.
4.2 Cash, Consumption, Tourism

A combination of infrastructure (road networks and cargo vehicles), appetite (for cheap, manufactured Chinese goods), and purchasing power (income gained both from tourism and remittance economies) has accelerated an ongoing shift from barter-oriented to monetized commercial trade relations in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands. A predominance of monetary cash is central to this change, as money is now a medium of exchange and a factor of capital accumulation, both of which strongly affect consumer practices and state regulation across the region. However, this is not to say that trans-Himalayan trade was not monetized with national currencies before the 21st century.

Trade across the Himalaya has been monetized to a measurable degree for centuries (Bishop 1990), represented by the circulation – first sparingly, then more widely – of silver Indian Rupees, Tibetan coins, and both Nepali and Chinese paper currencies. However, up until the 1950-60s and the occupation of Tibet by China, the majority of trade between Mustang and Tibet remained predominantly barter-oriented (van Spengen 2000; Fürer-Haimendorf 1988). After China occupied Tibet in the 1950s and the Tibetan resistance movement based in Mustang motivated Beijing to close the border in the early 1960s, initial disruption to regional exchange relations included an immediate decline in person-to-person trade as well as suspension of the semi-annual tsongra. Although the easement of border regulations in the 1970s enabled a renewal of barter-based trade relations, many informants claim it was at this time that money became increasingly central to trans-border transactions between Mustang and Tibet. As an elder member of Mustang’s noble family – himself a successful businessman – explained to me in Tsarang village, “everything changed when China came to Tibet.”
Commodity exchange in Mustang, as elsewhere in the world, has never been defined exclusively as _either_ a barter-based _or_ a money-mediated relationship. Although barter is indeed “a special form of commodity exchange,” this is not to say, as Appadurai claims, that barter remains a relationship between people and things in which “money plays either no role or a very indirect role (as a mere unit of account)” (2013: 17). Arguing against anthropological tropes that romanticize barter and condemn monetized relations, Hart notes that the two forms of exchange have never been mutually exclusive and in fact historically work together (2005). Hart points out that money mediates and stabilizes highly complex forms of exchange and, as such, is as useful for trade and barter oriented societies as it is for 21st century global finance. “So money is the common measure of value uniting all the independent acts of exchange, stabilizing the volatile world of commodity exchange” (2005: 9). Hart goes on to argue that money, and the control of it, quickly became fundamental to both state and merchant practices. In conversation with Hart, Walker’s study of transporters and regulators in the Upper Mekong borderlands (and discussed more extensively below) also reveals a symbiosis between traders and the state: that is, the state gains and utilizes tax revenues on trade as a symbol and mechanism of power just as merchants cooperate with state policies in order to gain legal protection and maintain public standards. As can be seen Mustang and elsewhere across the trans-Himalayan borderlands, the barter of commodities, the exchange of money, and the production of protectionist and lucrative relationships between state and society have long worked hand in hand, reflected in how transactions happen in concert with both traders and regulators.

Shaped by consumers’ and traders’ relationships with one another via markets and mediated by state institutions, the exchange of money, like other material things, is all about social relations. Complicating Hart’s work on coinage and recognizing a problematic distinction
between heads as political authority and tails as quantitative value, Vasantkumar (2016) examines the symbology and circulation of 18\textsuperscript{th} - 19\textsuperscript{th} century Chinese coins to argue that heads and tails are not only about the state and the market, respectively or exclusively. Instead, Vasantkumar argues that coinage, the crown, and the market are far more complicated and flexible, such that not only heads but also “‘tails’, rather than serving as the site of natural or impartial quantification is deeply configured by state power…(or) tails in heads and heads in tails.” (2016: 34). By complicating the two sides of the coin both theoretically and materially, Vasantkumar’s analysis contributes to Dodd’s theorization that money is about much more than just a medium of exchange and utility device for balancing transactional difficulties of barter. Rather, both Vasantkumar and Dodd show that money has far wider uses, including a means of tribute, a medium of communication, and a method of quantification as well as a mechanism of capital, debt, guilt, waste, territory, culture, and in its most fetishized form, utopia (2014). I use these conceptualizations of money as social relation and flexible mediator between market, citizens, and states in order to more closely examine how the expansion of cash circulations between Mustang and Tibet has repositioned local populations with respect to one another as well as the Nepali and Chinese states.

Despite a long-term presence of coinage and cash mediation in trans-Himalayan trade relations, between the 1960-90s, the dominance of the region’s barter systems waned amidst political economic transitions and Nepal’s geopolitical transformations with both China and India. In an analysis of trans-border trade between northwest Nepal and western Tibet in the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, Bishop notes that although money circulated in the region for centuries, it was in fact utilized for accounting and for compensation of surpluses and shortfalls when adequate in-kind exchange was unavailable (1990: 302). That is, money was used to augment barter relations,
rather than as a replacement to barter itself. In addition to stagnation in trade between Nepal and Tibet as a result of Chinese occupation and Khampa resistance, local and regional economies transformed from the 1960s to the 1990s as a result of several other conditions. National and international factors of influence included new regulations levied by the Nepal monarchy, security interventions directed from Delhi, and the flood of Tibetan refugees into India and Nepal.

Alongside these factors, the introduction of Indian salt to Nepal was one of the greatest harbingers of change from barter to cash economics. In his ethnographic history of trade along the Kali Gandaki Valley between Tibet and central Nepal, Charles Ramble (2017) shows that the political economy of the salt trade not only garnered wealth for privileged, noble members of various subsections of Mustang society, but consolidated even greater wealth in the hands of ethnically Thakali traders further down the Kali Gandaki Valley. Although values were recognized and expressed in Nepali Rupees, Ramble recognizes that “salt and grain were usually exchanged directly” rather than mediated by cash (2017: 5). Having won lucrative and highly coveted contracts by auction from the Nepal Monarchy, the 19th century Thakali salt houses of Tukche represent a proto-form of commercial exchange in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands and an early example of substantial trans-Himalayan wealth accumulation mediated by central state interventions. With salt prices set per unit (mana⁴) and respective to territorial divisions that delimited where traders from respective villages could carry their goods, the Kali Gandaki salt trade constituted the single largest economic system in the region, but one that was also subject to Nepali state control. Furthermore, Tukche’s position as a regional rather than international border also illustrates an earlier case of border as resource and both means and mode of accumulation in (Lower rather than Upper) Mustang.

⁴ One mana is equal to .545 liters in volume.
In 1963, the Government of Nepal transformed trade economies on a national level, but especially across the trans-Himalaya, with the formation of the Nepal Salt Trading Company (NSTC). In an effort to address widespread medical problems associated with goiter and cretinism, the Government of Nepal created the NSTC as a public health institution to distribute subsidized, iodized Indian salt across the country (Saxer 2013). A national development priority, this intervention constituted a case of state presence seen and experienced as policy rather than physicality. Reflecting a particularly close relationship between Kathmandu and Delhi at the time, this salt act also disrupted the flow and value of Tibetan salt and political economies up and down the Kali Gandaki Valley. This event led not only to the demise of the trans-Himalayan salt trade but, by extension, affected numerous other social relations and consumer practices long tied into the region’s salt-wool-grain exchange (Bishop 1990; van Spengen 2000). The evaporation of Tibetan salt as a commodity with an exceptionally high exchange value shifted the terms of regional systems of barter and led to the monetization of other commodities traditionally bundled into the salt trade – including not only grains and livestock but precious stones and textiles as well as ritual objects and metalwork.

Looking outside of trans-Himalayan environments for new livelihood opportunities, in the 1960s, entrepreneurial communities from Mustang began to generate cash revenues through seasonal work in India’s winter textile markets. Alongside other trans-Himalayan and Tibetan refugee populations (Lau 2012), Lo-ba entrepreneurs started to generate dependable cash profits in Assam and other Indian states by selling woolen, acrylic, and cotton sweaters manufactured in the Indian Punjab during the Subcontinent’s cold winter months from November to March. This seasonal migratory livelihood continues today, and is so substantial that Lo-ba trade associations have formed with respect to the specific Indian states where members work. These trade
associations support new business enterprises and advance philanthropic work across Mustang.

In addition to restoring monasteries and paying for children’s education, capital generated from the sweater business is reinvested in development projects throughout Mustang. After a season of selling sweaters on the streets of major cities such as Mumbai and Delhi as well as smaller towns throughout Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan, Mustang’s sweater sellers typically reinvest their earnings in the purchase of Chinese, Indian, and Nepali manufactured commodities in Kathmandu. An effective mechanism for Lo-bas to procure goods for their village stores, capital continues to circulate through the widespread purchase, transport, and resale of these goods from Kathmandu to Mustang every spring season. Hauled back to Mustang’s domestic spaces and village stores alike, foods, clothes, electronics, and furnishings purchased with cash from sweater sales have become customary material bases of everyday life in Mustang and connect capital circulations with consumer practices across the district.

Figure 4.5 Lo Gekar mani-kang (prayers wheel room) sponsored by “Assam Sweater Association”

Source: Photo by author (April 2015)
Despite the development over time of trans-local political economies between Mustang and Chinese Tibet, central Nepal, and northern India, both wealthy hotel owners and small shopkeepers said that it wasn’t until the early 1990s that cash became the fundamental medium of exchange for trans-border trade across the region. It was at this time that tourism was launched as a new, cash-based industry in Mustang, and this industry quickly generated ongoing shifts in consumer practices, social relations, and everyday experiences with the Nepali state for Mustang. Specifically, transformations towards cash-based economic relations in the 1990s hinged on the advent of a highly regulated and uniquely expensive tourism industry for Upper Mustang that to this day remains directed by state elites in Kathmandu.

In a break from the longstanding, state-imposed isolation of Upper Mustang, in 1992 the Tourism Board of His Majesty’s Government of Nepal “opened” Mustang to international visitors according to a closely managed, low quota tourism policy. Jumping at the opportunity to travel to a region that had long been closed to outsiders, foreign adventurers quickly lined up to pay upwards of $1000 per week (far more than the average annual income for a typical citizen in Nepal) for the privilege to visit a place sold as the Himalaya’s “Last Forbidden Kingdom” (Matthiessen and Laird 1996). State policies mandated that limited numbers of foreign visitors to Mustang travel through guided tours run by trekking companies established in Kathmandu. These groups were required to be self-sufficient, such that shelter, food provisions, and adequate sundries were carried for what was routinely a 10-14 day trek through the district. Elite families in Mustang with economic and social capital quickly joined the action by forming their own trekking companies that operated both in concert and through competition with more established tour operators based in Kathmandu. According to ACAP policies, the strict regulations and limitation on visitor numbers were ostensibly intended to protect Mustang’s fragile alpine
landscape as well as what was advertised to foreign visitors as the “unique and ancient” cultural traditions of Mustang. However, a key outcome of new tourism policies was the consolidation of wealth and uneven revenue distribution, as those already positioned at the upper levels of Mustang society captured the economic benefits from a global industry and its denizens newly interested in Mustang.

A case of state power exercised remotely, tourism brought new experiences with modernity and capitalist economic relations to many Lo-bas, particularly wealth polarization and uneven development. Although highly disruptive, tourism injected unprecedented quantities of cash into Mustang’s social relations and capital circulations. Hoteliers from upper class families leveraged preexisting social and financial capital to develop business infrastructures and collect substantial profits from the new industry. Lo-bas without the financial means or social networks to open an entirely new business also found entrepreneurial opportunities, particularly through the production and sale of handicrafts and other cottage industry work. However, despite new experiences with tourism across Mustang society, the majority of profits were captured by and remained in the hands of state elites in Kathmandu. Expensive permit fees did not translate into national funding for development initiatives or social services, and Lo-bas continue to complain about the protracted situation (and rightly so). One young friend in Lo Monthang summarized this common sentiment, explaining that “foreigners pay lots of money to the Government to visit Mustang, but what does the Government give back to us? We can sell things and run restaurants, but the real money, it all stays in Kathmandu.”

After ten years of highly regulated tourism to Mustang, state policies changed again in the mid-2000s. The easing of requirements for self-sufficiency led to the establishment of guesthouses and restaurants for tourists along Mustang’s more popular trekking routes. These
small business enterprises introduced new and unprecedented experiences with capitalist relations across Mustang that also relied upon and expanded a cash medium of exchange. Although Mustang’s elite families were – and still are – at the forefront of tourism entrepreneurship, community members from other class and caste groups quickly joined the growing and profitable tourism industry. This relatively nascent economy based on tourism subsequently gained momentum through incremental changes such as higher quotas for foreign visitors, transformations with transport systems, and more aggressive marketing to more closely incorporate and coordinate Mustang with Nepal’s major, international adventure tourism sector. More recently, high numbers of domestic Nepali tourists – adventurous trekkers and teenage motorcyclers alike – have generated yet another profile and political dynamic for Mustang’s tourism economy.

The expansion of the tourism industry in Mustang – coupled with pervasive outmigration and associated remittance incomes – has generated purchasing powers and consumption practices that shape new cash-based orientations and capitalist relations for trans-Himalayan borderland populations. Initially accelerated by tourism incomes and cash revenues collected from outside the district, and now fueled by an unprecedented consumption of foreign manufactured commodities throughout Mustang, cash flows across the region have deepened as a result of new road infrastructures and state policies that collectively encourage and facilitate greater trade systems between Chinese Tibet and highland Nepal. Tracing a materialist-territorial trajectory, bigger cash flows, modern consumer practices, and wider capital circulations have together motivated the escalation of bureaucratic interventions of the Nepali state across Mustang. Practical and profit-generating effects (Painter 2006) of the state, the formation and
coordination of these new bureaucracies provides a view (Corbridge et al. 2005) into the outward expansion of Kathmandu’s regulatory power through the territorialization of borderland space.

4.3 Tsongra, Taxation, and Transport

For hundreds of years across the Tibetan Plateau, *tsongra* trade fairs have flourished as regular venues for economic and social exchange. From ancient bazaars of the historical Silk Roads to contemporary marketplaces along the borderlands of modern Asian states, the fairs have been places for traveling merchants, nomadic pastoralists, monastic commissaries, and highland entrepreneurs to trade, barter, buy, and sell. In the Mustang-Tibet borderlands, the *tsongra* has long served as the business event of the year.

*Figure 4.6 Lo-ba, Tibetan, and Chinese participants at the tsongra, August-September 2015*

Historically, the *tsongra* is where and when the bulk of the annual salt and wool trades took place. On the basis of this economy, additional trade also flourished, in textiles and metalwork, spices and dairy products. At the *tsongra*, thousands of Tibetan goats and sheep were
acquired for Nepal’s annual Dasain festivals, and sugar and grains from lowland, temperate Nepal were delivered to highland landscapes. Much like many of the other semi-annual seasonal trade fairs of the trans-Himalaya (van Spengen 2000), the tsongra predates the advent of the modern nation state. But whereas the historical tsongra was mediated almost entirely by barter and alternated locations between Chinese Tibet and Mustang, Nepal, the trade fairs today are mediated by cash, directed by Chinese administration, and take place only on the Tibetan side of the border each spring and fall.

Despite my efforts to visit the tsongra on multiple occasions, I was unable to do so. Exceptionally high snowpack in the winter of 2015 followed by the April-May earthquakes postponed that year’s spring event by several weeks. Efforts to attend the late summer-fall 2015 tsongra were stymied by more predictable travel restrictions placed on foreigners attempting to reach Tibet from Nepal’s Mustang border. And the spring 2016 tsongra was cancelled altogether. While I did hear stories of one particularly well-seasoned European having made it to the tsongra from Mustang in prior years, I was repeatedly told that neither Nepali nor Chinese officials allow foreigners to cross the Kora La border. This is consistent with Nepali and Chinese protocols for cross-border travel outside of the Kodari-Zhangmu and Simikot-Purang borders.  

Although I could not make it to the tsongra myself, I was able to interview numerous Lo-bas shortly following their return from Tibet to Mustang. These interviews provided a view into what sorts of things are now purchased and delivered from the tsongra, why they are desired, how they are transported, to what degree they are now taxed, and in what ways these factors are new, welcomed, resisted, and/or disruptive.

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5 I also tried to cross the Rasuwa-Kyirong border on three separate occasions, to no avail. Despite having a multiple-entry Chinese business visa as well as a multiple-entry Nepali visa, it was not possible for me to cross Nepal and China’s newest ‘open’ border from either the Rasuwa or the Tibet/Kyirong sides. For more on these experiences, see (Murton 2016a).
The tsongra is both a social scene and a business event. In addition to traditional tent accommodations, concrete hotels have been constructed on site. Transactions take place in restaurants, bars, and discotheques as well as brick and mortar shops, open-air stalls, and along makeshift roadways. While trade in Gold Star sneakers is less frequently encountered today, Lo-bas still bring Indian watches and wooden bowls as well as metalwork and semi-precious stones from Kathmandu and caterpillar fungus from northern Nepal. Tibetans – and especially entrepreneurial Khampas – sell tables, shoes, and carpets and buy turquoise, coral, and pearls. Tibetan nomads sell butter and meat and buy tsampa, the roasted barley flour staple of the trans-Himalaya region. Several friends in Lo Monthang who attend the tsongra every year told me that most Nepali visitors from outside of Mustang, including both tourists and government officials, rarely engage in business exchange and instead visit primarily for recreation. Many Lo-bas also indicated their view that the most entrepreneurial
and highly motivated of *tsongra* merchants are ethnic Han Chinese, a population with comparative advantages based on key connections to manufacturing centers in eastern China where the blankets and pillows, food and drinks, and clothes and shoes are commercially produced (Fischer 2014). As one young trader in Lo Monthang explained to me, “today, the *tsongra* is really a Chinese marketplace. Tibetan things are there, and a little bit from Nepal as well. But it is mostly Chinese goods. These things are cheap, and so they are popular. I guess it’s what people want.”

In order to attend the *tsongra*, residents from Nepal – Lo-bas, Tibetans *in cognito*, and Nepalis from other ethnic groups – all must abide by strict Chinese regulations. This includes entering China’s Tibetan territory through the Kora La border gate at a specific and designated time, disclosing biographic data and being photographed for entry into a *tsongra*-specific database, carrying a basic ID chit provided by Chinese border guards, and relinquishing any personal items such as necklaces and lockets that depict the Dalai Lama (religious accouterments that are highly common to Mustang). By cooperating with these conditions, visitors without even a passport or any form of Nepali state identification can then enter Chinese territory, drive, ride, or walk the 10 kilometers from the Kora La border post to the *tsongra* grounds in Likse, and stay for the duration of the trade fair (up to several weeks at a time).

One Tibetan friend’s account of his experience at the *tsongra* in 2015 suggests that the event is a suspension of Nepal-China border management and that profit drives policies from both sides. A Tibetan refugee without Nepali citizenship, Dawa owns a small store along the main road in Jomsom. Although his business is based on the sale of Tibetan curios, he sources his goods in Kathmandu, including carpets, jewelry, replica ritual items, and other souvenirs that tourists (including both foreigners and Nepalis) consider ‘traditional’ Tibetan things. Having
heard rumors of better sale prices for *yartsa gumbu* in Tibet than in Nepal, Dawa went to the *tsongra* in September 2015 to sell caterpillar fungus that he and a friend had bought from harvesters in Mustang and Manang districts. Traveling from Jomsom to the Kora La by a Nepali Pulsar motorcycle, Dawa and his friend were able to cross the Nepal-China border without producing any forms of identification or having proven their Nepali citizenship in any substantial way (which, as Tibetan refugees, they did not have in the first place). Receiving a small chit from the Chinese border guards as evidence of their permission to visit the *tsongra*, they continued to the trade fair on their Pulsar and stayed for a week. Upon arrival at the *tsongra*, however, Dawa discovered that per kilogram prices for *yartsa gumbu* were even lower than those in Nepal’s larger markets of Jomsom and Pokhara. Disappointed but determined to make the most of their trip, Dawa bought Tibetan tea for his mother-in-law as well as inexpensive, Chinese-made clothes and sneakers for his young son and daughter. A Tibetan refugee without citizenship papers for Nepal, Dawa would normally avoid the Nepal-China border and, more specifically, the Chinese Armed Police Force (APF) that patrols the borderlands (and whom I narrowly missed encountering during my motorcycle visit to the border fence with Kalsang). However, despite the conspicuous presence of the APF at the *tsongra*, Dawa indicated that the experience did not seem dangerous or risky for Tibetans like himself, and that they had no trouble crossing back into Nepal with their modest amount of purchases. From Dawa’s perspective, “the rules around the border are different during the *tsongra*. It is all about business.”

Up until 2007-08, the location of the *tsongra* alternated season to season – one spring it was held in the Mustang pastures of Nyechung, the following fall it was in the Tibetan grasslands of Likse. One of the biggest businessmen in Lo Monthang – a trader who has participated in the *tsongra* for decades – told me that this alternating schedule and venue was
made on the basis of an agreement between the King of Mustang and Chinese government officials. When I asked why the tsongra was no longer held on the Mustang side of the border, he reiterated the same comment as many other Lo-ba merchants and smaller-scale traders – that Chinese officials unilaterally broke the treaty nearly one decade ago. “Before, it was very easy – one year the tsongra was in Mustang, one year it was in Tibet. But now it is always there, and it is more Chinese.” While nobody I asked could say exactly why or what policy dictated that the tsongra was held exclusively in Likse on the Chinese side of the border, several informants mentioned an important exception to the single-venue nature of the event.

Following the completion of the road over the Kora La in 2004, for several years the tsongra was a mobile fair and took place much closer to the population centers in Mustang. During that time, Tibetan and Chinese traders would drive down to Lo Monthang, park their trucks and tractors outside the city walls, and set up shop for the two-week market. Although this marked an exception to the normal place and practice of the tsongra, it proved to be popular with local Lo-bas. However, such acknowledgements were not made without reservation. A shop-owner named Karma told me, “When the tsongra was here (in Lo Monthang), it was very convenient. It was good. We didn’t spend money or time going to Tibet. And the prices were the same. But it also made people in Mustang want more Chinese things. Now, look around, everything is Chinese.” As Karma signaled, the tsongra is the most direct and expedient source for Chinese goods that have become the basis of consumption practices in Mustang – the noodles and beer as well as the clothes, carpets, blankets, and stoves that now characterize domestic spaces across the district.

The low price of Chinese-made goods is highly attractive to Mustang’s buyers and according to many merchants, the Lo Monthang-based tsongra led directly to the massive, semi-
annual purchase and import of Chinese commodities that now defines trade relations between Tibet and Mustang. By bringing shoes, shirts, food, and drinks directly to the consumer rather than requiring consumers to travel for their needs – and further sweetened by lower prices that avoided both transport costs and Nepali state taxes – the seasons of the Lo Monthang-based fairs helped establish new preferences for Chinese goods. Moreover, these preferences have since been translated and internalized into practices of consumption for Lo-bas that previously did not exist to the same degree in Mustang. One seasonal trader in his mid-30s told me, “before, we would trade with Tibet, and we would buy things, but they were traditional things – like tea and salt. But today it is all Chinese things, like beer and noodles but also blankets and tables. Now people have a taste for these things in Mustang, not just because they are cheap, but because some of the things are good.”

*Figures 4.8 Chinese goods at trailside tea noodle shop and annual district-wide soccer tournament*

Source: Photos by author (June 2015 and August 2013)

Although the historical *tsongra* system has changed – the fair is no longer held in Nyechung and the mobile market also ceased a decade ago – the Lo Monthang-based *tsongra* marks a key turning point. The owner of a small teashop echoed the perspective of larger
merchants with whom I spoke, expressing the belief that holding the *tsongra* in the cultural and social center of Mustang was a Chinese ploy to hook Lo-bas on Chinese goods. “The Chinese are very clever,” she told me, “and they want us to want their stuff.” While the teashop owner’s point identifies fundamental economic motives behind the expansion of trans-border trade between Tibet and Mustang, she fell short of addressing convergent interests expressed by the Government of Nepal through tax policies that are a response to new consumer practices. That is, by increasing the appetite for Chinese goods throughout Mustang, and by selling greater volumes to merchants in Nepal, Chinese and Tibetan businessmen have together helped to generate the consumer demands, commodity flows, and capital circulations that new Nepali borderland bureaucracies in turn control, tax, and transform into revenue. That is, traders, consumers, border officials, and other state regulators work hand-in-hand in the creation of new economic relations.

*Figure 4.9 Chinese Armed Police Force vehicles and Nepali cargo truck at Likse tsongra offices*

In the context of the Mustang-Tibet *tsongra* and everyday popular consumption, trade and bureaucracy in fact grow together. Scheduled by Chinese political authorities in occasional
but uncertain consultation with Mustang’s political elite, the trade fairs are now far more formal and regulated than ever before. While the dates are generally the same from year to year – immediately following the planting and harvesting seasons – the fairs are no longer held in Nepal and instead take place exclusively on the Tibet side of the border. They are also located in immediate proximity to the military encampments of China’s paramilitary Armed Police Force. According to several informants in Mustang, in 2015 over one thousand Lo-bas attended the tsongra, plus dozens of Nepalis from lower Mustang as well as a handful of Tibetan refugees (who identified as Lo-ba rather than Tibetan and did not reveal their exile status). Incidentally, 2016 was noted as a particularly quiet year for the tsongra, and a number of people with whom I spoke in Mustang speculated on the reason for the downturn – their opinions ranged from lingering effects of the 2015 earthquakes to strict government controls over trade and mobility in China to more of Mustang’s import demands now being sourced in Kathmandu rather than Tibet. More frequently referenced than any other factor, however, was the new imposition of Nepali taxes.

Taxes were first levied on tsongra imports beginning in the spring of 2015. According to several shopkeepers and hoteliers in Tsarang and Lo Monthang, the taxes were initially pegged at a flat rate of NRs 6000 per truckload (US $60) and NRs 3000-4000 (US $30-40) per tractor-load. Although local informants indicated that these rates were not prohibitively onerous, they did suggest that the fees were high enough to make many buyers reconsider the relative value of purchasing Chinese goods at the tsongra rather than in Pokhara or Kathmandu. Moreover, everyone with whom I spoke also anticipated the tax rate to rise in coming years.⁶ Several of my interlocutors also referenced the recent feasibility study and government plans to expand

⁶ At the time of writing, I have not been able to get reliable data on whether or not 2016 or 2017 rates reflect this expected tax hike.
infrastructure along the Mustang-Tibet road for greater regional trade and international throughput, namely, the construction of the dry port and expansion of the Mustang-Tibet road (Giri 2017). While they did not expect these infrastructural projects to occur particularly quickly, they did acknowledge that an increasing discourse in the Nepali media on plans for infrastructure development has brought the prospect into wider conversation on a national scale (Report 2016). One elderly Lo-ba in Tsarang explained a perspective that I heard many other times during my research. “Soon, Mustang will be like Rasuwa or Kodari (Tatopani), the roads where all the Chinese stuff comes from. It will bring money to Mustang, and to Kathmandu. That’s what the government wants. But it will also bring other things, and they are not all good. This road and trade business is going to change everything, just like it has done elsewhere.” A convergence of physical infrastructural interventions and national discourse on development has repositioned Mustang as a key site for road and trade-based state modernization programs, an agenda that resonates strongly with other national development imaginaries such as making Nepal into a railway corridor for transit trade between China and India (Bhushal 2017).

In addition to my interviews about trade between the tsongra and villages throughout Upper Mustang, I also traveled with numerous Lo-ba traders on their return to Mustang after they spent the winter in Kathmandu. In addition to the semi-annual tsongra periods, the weeks immediately after the Tibetan New Year (Losar) generally in March-April are also a key time for the delivery of commodities into Mustang. Since 2012 and the completion of the road from Beni to Jomsom, this annual migration has been characterized by truckloads of Nepali, Indian, and Chinese goods lumbering up the Mustang roads and Kali Gandaki gorge, destined for shops, restaurants, and homes throughout villages across Mustang. Participating in this annual event enabled me to observe to what extent new road systems enable the delivery not only of Indian
and Nepali products to Mustang, but Chinese things as well. Marking a surprising and especially circuitous import trajectory, many goods carried from Kathmandu to Mustang were identical to those purchased at the tsongra, and despite different taxes and transport costs, many informants reported that Chinese goods have become even more affordable when bought in bulk in Kathmandu or Pokhara than through direct purchase at the tsongra.

Figure 4.10 Tsarang village shop stocked with Chinese, Nepali, and Indian goods

While approximately 50% of my survey informants told me that the majority of Chinese products in Mustang are still sourced at the tsongra, this perspective was nearly impossible to verify beyond anecdotal assessments. Other than rough reporting on trucks and tractors that pass through the Nyechung check-post on their return to Mustang from the Likse tsongra, the Government of Nepal does not keep detailed accounts of import volumes or revenue statistics for imports over the Kora La. Similarly, the quantity and value of goods purchased and delivered from Kathmandu are not recorded with any rigorous detail, largely because they are bought and moved domestically. Nevertheless, massive quantities of international goods are increasingly
brought to the district via the Pokhara-Beni-Jomsom road, and numerous other informants speculated that this Kali Gandaki route may now facilitate an equal (or even greater) share of imports to Mustang as compared to the Tibet-Mustang road straight from the tsongra.

Recent changes to the tsongra as well as everyday consumer habits in Mustang illustrate how consumption is a convergence of material, cultural, social, and political practices. While traditional trans-Himalayan staples such as tea, butter, meat, and salt are still procured in Tibet, the majority of Lo-ba purchases are pre-packaged foods and manufactured household goods: biscuits and noodles, beer and soft drinks, stoves and furniture, carpets and clothes. Great volumes of imports – destined for both larger-scale traders’ wholesale shops and village farmers’ private household use – are carried from Tibet back to Mustang not by yak, horse, or goat but by truck, tractor and jeep. While a heady mix of characters and commodities comprises a chaotic and festive environment, it is the wholesale buyers of Mustang who truly shape the tsongra business climate. That is, the tsongra is where the thulo manchhes – or Nepali “big men” – from Lo Monthang and other village centers of Upper Mustang buy in bulk, purchasing enough goods to fill 3-4 large trucks each. These merchants then return to Mustang as regional distributors and local wholesalers in their own right, from which smaller shopkeepers buy goods to stock the shelves of local village stores. In fact, it is precisely the increasing volume of purchases at the tsongra for import and resale in Mustang that has transformed the dynamic of the fairs from a place oriented towards barter and social exchange into a space of earnest capitalist business. Recollecting both his profits and losses from the previous spring’s tsongra, one businessman from Lo Monthang succinctly explained: “everything is now money, it’s not trade!”
### Table 4.1 Trans-border trade & Tibet-Mustang/China-Nepal commodity flows pre-1959 & 2000-present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-1959 (source of goods)</th>
<th>Trade Flow</th>
<th>2000-present (source of goods)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tibet</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tibet/China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>salt, goats, wool, carpets, horses, dairy products</td>
<td></td>
<td>blankets, packaged food, liquor, bottled/canned drinks, stoves, carpets, textiles/clothing, solar panels, electronics, motorcycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustang - Upper Kali Gandaki</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mustang - Upper Kali Gandaki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dairy products, cereals (barley, buckwheat, millet)</td>
<td></td>
<td>dairy products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beni-Pokhara-Baglung</td>
<td></td>
<td>Beni-Pokhara-Baglung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rice, spices, metal work, ritual objects</td>
<td></td>
<td>iodized salt, packaged/canned food and drinks, textiles/clothing, dishware,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.4 Regulation as Mobility and Containment

The motorcycle riders of Mustang are worried. They are worried because the rules of motorcycle ownership are changing, and the new rules include unprecedented taxes and registration policies enforced by administrative units of the Government of Nepal. One of the most common and popular Chinese products in Mustang, Chinese motorcycles became ubiquitous throughout Mustang in the 1990s not only because they were cheap and convenient but also because they were unregulated (which made them even cheaper and more convenient).

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7 This list is representative but not exhaustive of Tibet-Nepal trade patterns through Mustang.
Even before completion of the road from Lo Monthang to Tibet over the Kora La, unregistered and untaxed Chinese motorcycles were imported to the district. Sourced predominantly at the *tsongra*, these vehicles generally cost less than 1 lakh Nepali Rupees (under $1000), far cheaper than an equivalent Indian motorcycle bought in central Nepal. For well over a decade up until 2014, Nepali border officials did not levy customs duties on Chinese motorcycle imports, and Lo-bas avoided paying excise taxes because the motorcycles were almost entirely unregistered.

*Figure 4.11 Ubiquitous unregistered Chinese motorcycle parked in Lo Monthang*

Beginning in 2015 and in concert with other bureaucratic interventions across Mustang, state administration exercised by the Chief District Officer (CDO) implemented new requirements for motorcycle owners to register and license their Chinese motorcycles in the district capital of Jomsom. This registration process includes back payment on customs duties as well as an excise tax as high as 40% of the purchase price. Moreover, the motorcycle owners have been made aware that if they do not register their bikes, they risk being fined up to NRs 50000 (US$ 500) and having the bikes possessed and impounded by government police forces.
Representing the regulation of physical mobility under particular economic and legal terms of containment, this new (but still poorly understood) policy shows how a territorializing Nepali state affects communities in Mustang through its own bureaucratic effects.

Reflecting on the ways that motorcycle ownership has recently grown across the district, several young men told me that the trend represents a key dimension of modernization in Mustang. “When our fathers and grandfathers used to go to Tibet, they would buy horses. But for our generation, it is motorcycles. That’s what people want because they are cheap and convenient. We still buy horses, but not so much because they are expensive. And you need special skills. Fewer people have the horse skills these days.” Pasang, one of Lo Monthang’s most capable horsemen, repeated a similar perspective to me. “Today, people do not know horses like they used to. And they don’t use them as much. With the roads and jeeps (and motorcycles), people think they don’t need horses. I use them for my business, but I am one of the few.” While Pasang uses his horses in the trekking industry, his acknowledgement as “one of the few” reveals the significant degree to which horsemanship has rapidly declined in Mustang. More importantly, this decline in horse-ownership is inversely correlated to increasing motorcycle ownership across the district.

Chinese motorcycles in Mustang provide a material link in the transformation of consumer practices, bureaucratic regulations, and territorial power in Nepal. In addition to their affordable market price, Chinese motorcycles became immensely popular in Mustang precisely because they were not subject to Nepali state taxation and regulation. The purchase of motorcycles from the tsongra thus became a widespread consumer practice across the district. But a critical mass of unregulated vehicles presents an open opportunity for revenue generation through state intervention. In the interest of managing traffic and safety as well as recognizing a
distinct potential for revenue generation, the Government of Nepal implemented new tax and registration policies. By exercising control over motorcycle ownership and use, government authorities deployed the new regulations to reposition Mustang’s motorcycle owners as consumer subjects (Hetherington 2007) of the Nepali state. Moreover, as controls upon these populations and the broader social and physical spaces they inhabit – or containments over particular mobilities – new taxes and bureaucratic regulations are further transforming landscapes across Mustang into a new territorialized form of state space. And yet just as quickly as new administrative and territorializing infrastructures are introduced, local populations find alternative routes by which to exercise their mobility and thus avoid and circumvent containments of the state.

A key way in which road-based mobilities circumvent the containments of bureaucratic regulation, new transport routing reflects the direct impact that new tax policies and road systems have on trans-border trade and consumer practices in Nepal. That is, communities in Mustang have developed large appetites for Chinese goods but consumers are unable to freely travel to Tibet, and increasingly eager to avoid proportionally higher per-unit taxes. Because Lo-bas cannot exercise the rights of border citizenship, their ability to acquire goods directly from Tibet/China is particularly constrained. Moreover, the 2015 introduction of the per-vehicle tax on imports to Mustang has changed the calculus and local decision-making for sourcing Chinese imports direct from the tsongra. Many buyers suggested that more circuitous sourcing via Kathmandu and Pokhara has recently become preferable because of the ways that bulk purchases distribute and reduce overall expenses.

Mustang’s business sector and consumer classes have begun to meet an unprecedented level of the district’s purchase demands by sourcing Chinese goods from Kathmandu. This shift
in the sourcing and transport of commodities is largely an economic calculation made in response to shifting tax rates for trade between Tibet and Mustang. One of Mustang’s larger traders told me, “before the taxes and the road, it was cheaper to buy things at the tsongra. But now it is different. Everything is now available in Kathmandu, and the road makes it easier to bring things from there. And now because of the taxes in Mustang, the tsongra is more difficult. So now we get more things from Nepal (Kathmandu).” When I asked further about the routes traveled and rates paid for Chinese imports to Mustang today, several shopkeepers reported that it was cheaper for them to buy goods in Kathmandu and then transport them overland through Pokhara, Beni, and Jomsom to Mustang than it was to buy an equivalent truck-load at the tsongra. Out of sixty household surveys, over 80% of respondents replied that they consistently source popular Chinese products like fleece blankets and vacuum thermoses from Kathmandu instead of the tsongra. When I asked why this was, many reiterated the view that the prices were generally cheaper and also that “the choices were better” in Kathmandu.

Businessmen and household consumers alike acknowledged that it was really only cost-effective to bring goods from Kathmandu to Mustang when operating at the scale of a full truckload. Smaller-scale buyers are eager to benefit from the economies of scale gained with buying and transporting goods at higher volume. Although household-level consumers may not have the demand (or resources) to fill a cargo-truck alone, multiple families frequently pool their resources in order to hire and share a truck for the long haul to Mustang. When I asked one seasonal shop-owner whether she generally purchased her goods from the tsongra or Kathmandu, she said “Both. In the spring and fall, we get drinks, noodles, beer, and whiskey from China (the tsongra). But Chinese rice is no good. And now Chinese things are more expensive. And the quality is questionable. So now, we get more from Kathmandu, like Nepali or Indian rice. But
also Chinese blankets and Tibetan carpets. These things too are now cheaper for us in Kathmandu.”

The preferred avenues for bringing goods to Mustang has changed in tandem with the recent shift in transport routes from Tibet to Kathmandu. Previously imported to Nepal through the Kodari-Zhangmu border and along the Friendship-Arniko Highway, most of the Chinese products in Kathmandu now come via the Rasuwa-Kyirong Road because of ongoing environmental hazards that were compounded by the 2015 earthquake and continued expansion of road and trade infrastructures along the Rasuwa-Kyirong route. Destined for the Mahaboudha wholesale market in central Kathmandu, large-scale traders pay customs duties and import taxes on the goods in Rasuwaghadi, as was formerly done at Kodari-Zhangmu. These duties and taxes are then absorbed into the market prices by the time such goods are bought and sold at Mahaboudha, and yet at a rate that is viewed as preferable for many of Mustang’s buyers.

My survey data shows that the overall cost of goods across Mustang has dropped in recent years and local informants report that the consumption of Chinese imports continues to rise annually. This economic dynamic can be attributed to three interdependent factors: 1) the ubiquity of mass-produced Chinese products throughout Mustang (and the country); 2) recent reductions in overland shipping costs to Mustang from both southern Tibet and central Nepal; and 3) increasing levels of purchasing power in Mustang.

First, the economies of scale behind Chinese manufacturing and shipping have significantly reduced the real prices of many Tibet-sourced goods in Mustang, particularly carpets, kitchenware, and furniture but also food and drinks. Despite the long distances traveled, informants in Mustang consistently report that Chinese and Tibetan products purchased in central
Nepal are less expensive than goods purchased directly from Tibet. Packaged in plastic and paper, imported Chinese food and drink imports are non-perishable, transport friendly, and manufactured for long distance travel.

Second, the time, labor, and cost for transporting goods from both Tibet and Central Nepal to Mustang has plummeted in recent years as a result of improved road conditions and larger vehicle fleets. Lodge- and shop-owners alike told me that shipping costs have been reduced nearly in half from what they were just one decade ago and that they now pay far less to transport staples such as rice, lentils, beer, and noodles from Pokhara to Upper Mustang. For example, ten years ago it cost at least 100 Nepali Rupees (US $1) to ship four kilograms of cargo from Pokhara to Lo Monthang; today, that same cargo can be shipped for less than NRs 60 (US 60 cents). More broadly, flat shipping rates for the transport of dry foods from Pokhara to Kagbeni and Lo Monthang are today quoted at NRs 8/kilogram and NRs 14/kilogram, respectively. In the early 2000s, when mules carried most goods, rates were NRs 15/kg and NRs 25/kg, respectively. Roads and vehicles have reduced the friction of distance for shipping to Mustang and thereby helped lower prices while contributing to changing consumer habits and trade practices across the region.

Third, outmigration over the past decade has had profound impacts on both social reproduction and purchasing power in Mustang, as well as throughout Nepal’s other northern borderland districts (Childs et al. 2014). Today, nearly every family in Mustang has immediate family or close relatives residing in New York City. Remittances from out-migrant kin have transformed economic relationships both within Mustang and across the border by injecting unprecedented levels of cash into local hands. Alongside the generation of new purchasing

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8 In the next breath, however, informants also complained of the inferior quality of modern Chinese manufacturing in comparison to the Tibetan craftsmanship that Mustang is long accustomed to.
powers, these international cash flows help recirculate capital across Lo-ba communities. And this all happens in concert with new livelihood practices as well as consumer preferences. For example, these (re)circulations of capital are advanced and reflected by reinvestments in local development, especially apparent with respect to the tourism sector and expansion of storefronts in village centers. Moreover, the rising scale and disruptive dynamics of these capital circulations continue to reshape social relations and set the ground for new bureaucratic effects of state institutionalization.

The current management of motorcycle ownership in Mustang as well as tax policies over wider trans-border commercialized trade relations demonstrates how the state works territorially to master its internal space (Agnew and Corbridge 2002; Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Painter 2006). Writing in the context of interstate systems, geopolitical orders, geopolitical discourse, and the territorial state, Agnew and Corbridge (2002) identify these practices of territoriality as that of “mastering space.” Drawing on Agnew and Corbridge’s conceptualization, this chapter argues that control of capital is central to the consolidation of state space and is instrumental (but not always tantamount) to the transformation of terrain into territory. Including not just the management of motorcycle owners but also non-observance of Border Citizenship privileges (as discussed in the previous chapter), Nepal’s state territoriality is expressed, exercised, and enforced through infrastructures of taxation and regulation. In addition to the construction of international border regimes and introduction of state bureaucracies in a

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9 While this transformation to political economic systems has generated new interventions of the Nepali state, the dynamics of new cash circulations also reinscribe long-established social hierarchies as discussed in Chapter 1. This is because Mustang’s higher-caste/class families generally have many relatives abroad and greater access to new consumer and transport mobilities.

10 Heeding Agnew’s warning of the “territorial trap” and avoiding a state-centric unit of analysis (1994), I use territory to understand state processes, but do not claim that territoriality is always and only about the state. Instead, I consider territorial practices of state making as internal operations of power within a state’s sovereign territory that can also happen with or against another state. Thus, this framing does not exclude wider consideration of the ways that the Nepali state uses particular economic and geopolitical relationships with China for its own state-making projects of national development – as I discuss more extensively in Chapter 5.
place like Mustang, vehicle registration, import taxes, citizenship identification, and other administrative effects of accountability (Painter 2010) (re)inscribe national populations as both consumer and citizen subjects of a territorializing state. By implementing various administrative effects, the state thus consolidates power and control over its population (Gupta 2012) in a constant effort to master sovereign space.

However, state controls also always motivate populations to find new ways to avoid regulation. These oscillations of mobility and containment become visible by looking at how consumer practices, routes of transport, and patterns of exchange shift in response to particular state interventions. That is, new mobilities generate new containments, but those containments also (re)produce new strategies and practices of mobility. Therefore, business across borderlands is thus a product of both regional traders and regulatory regimes. Together, they converge in productive and lucrative ways in the co-production of new markets and sites of accumulation.

In a study of the inter-relationships between traders, boat operators, and state regulators on the Mekong River, Andrew Walker argues that trade and regulation develop concurrently, that “state (and non-state) regulation is intrinsically involved in the creation of the contexts in which markets flourish. Regulatory action is involved in the creation of market towns, trade routes, and marketing infrastructure” (1999: 14). As new trade policies are drafted to reduce barriers to and expand exchange between Nepal and China (e.g. 2016 Nepal-China Transit Trade Treaty), the liberalization of trade in fact generates new measures of regulation and bureaucratic intervention. According to Walker, “many liberalizing initiatives, rather than representing a reduction of regulatory action, create the conditions for a new ‘mix’ of regulatory practice” (1999: 15).
Studying the strategies that both traders and officials employ to maximize profit, Walker reveals a central paradox of liberalization theory – that while liberalization is in principal taken and promoted to mean ‘free trade’ and deregulation, in practice it creates new dynamics of struggle for control over profits, and regulations help to channel the profits into designated places of accumulation for more privileged hands. “As trading and transport conditions become more liberalized, opportunities and incentives for regulation flourish. This ongoing regulation, while generating frequent complaint and disillusionment, also provide (unevenly distributed) benefits and opportunities for the transport operators, traders and entrepreneurs who are the agents of cross-border exchange” (1999: 5).

Providing another voice to Megoran’s call (2006, 2012) to bring ethnographic analysis into the writing of more complex border biographies, Walker’s study reveals the symbiotic strategies, circumventions, and methods by which cross-border boat operators in Laos engage with state bureaucracies and in so doing co-produce a mutually beneficial border regime. Specifically, Walker “highlights the extent to which members of frontier communities themselves are actively involved in the regulation of borders and in giving borderlines their particular local character” (1999: 94). As borderland traders adjust their practices (e.g. loads, products, routes, prices) to conform to state border policies, the boat operators and market sellers become agents of regulation themselves. Rather than seeing these regulatory agents as the faces only of a central state apparatus, it instead becomes apparent that “these mobile borderlanders are often active collaborators in processes of Upper Mekong regulation” (1999: 5). From borders of the Mekong to the trans-Himalaya, borderlands’ positionality (and identity) is in turn constantly shaped and reshaped by the trade, the regulations, and the borders that they help to co-produce.
Although untaxed and unregulated Chinese motorcycles are certainly their own kind of contraband, cross-border trade in Mustang has not yet been marked by high degrees of other illicit activities. This makes the Mustang-Tibet border different from many other borderlands, where smuggling and corruption go hand in hand with accumulation and regulation. To be sure, unregulated trade continues in Mustang, and the *yartsa gumbu* economy is a prime example of this kind of market. However, illegal and illicit activity in Mustang pales next to Nepal’s other trade borders, particularly when compared to Rasuwa-Kyirong or Kodari-Zhangmu, to say nothing of Nepal’s significantly larger border crossings with India. However, as cross-border trade, transport routes, and capital accumulations continue to expand in Mustang, it will be important to watch if other, darker vices of border business – things like usurious lending, prostitution, violence, and black marketeering – enter this trans-Himalayan environment as well.

As discussed above, the convergence of low-cost goods with increased purchasing power at the *tsongra* has accelerated cash flows, broadened commodity circulations, and reshaped consumption practices for populations across the district. These dynamics have motivated tax-oriented interventions of the Nepali state such that historically peripheral communities find themselves situated in new positions as taxable consumer subjects. As the powerful forces of commodity consumption, cash exchange, and capital circulation gain greater momentum across Mustang, the Nepali state increasingly takes new shape in order to manage populations, collect revenue, and control territory across the district. And in order to avoid these taxes and other infrastructures of regulation, Mustang’s traders and consumers seek at new routes and avenues of mobile circumvention to avoid containments of the state.

At the juncture of consumption practice and territorial control, Lo-bas’ enrollment in cash-based relations and commercial enterprises are key to the production of state space. New
bureaucratic infrastructures allow Kathmandu to claim – and build – both legitimacy and legibility through state power expressed in physical and psychological terms. Offices, uniforms, and taxes make bureaucratic administrators and local citizens alike mutually cognizant of state presence and further indicate that Mustang is no longer a blank on Nepal’s territorial map of development. As new road check-posts and police and military installations (Report 2016) reshape Mustang’s social and physical landscapes as Nepali state territory, administrative processes and practices constitute everyday measures and infrastructural projects of state control that reposition Mustang’s citizens and consumers within shifting configurations of mobility and containment.

4.5 Conclusion

As the case of Mustang shows, roads increase trade, more trade leads to larger capital circulations, capital circulations motivate new regulations, new regulations take shape as bureaucratic infrastructures, and these infrastructures generate new effects of territorial administration over state subjects in highland regions. Through the opening of new market outlets, Mustang has become a place where capitalist relations increasingly penetrate social systems and rewrite consumer practices. Experienced across newly securitized and surveilled borders and in spaces with expanding international connections, consumer practices in Mustang are also increasingly entangled with the modern forces of globalization.

Although trans-border trade was significantly (but never entirely) barter-based until the 1990s, business between Mustang and Tibet today is made with Chinese Renminbi and Nepali Rupees. Motorcycles are bought with cash, and Lo-ba consumers now reach the tsongra not by horse or foot, but by tractor and truck. Acquisitions from the trade fairs are intended for resale as
much as (if not more than) personal use. From the Tibet border, import volumes have increased exponentially as hundreds – sometimes thousands – of Lo-bas attend the tsongra to buy products for their homes, shops, and guesthouses. From central Nepal, commercial products are also transported to Mustang in droves during the annual spring migration back to the district from Kathmandu and Pokhara. Furthermore, tourism, sweater, and remittance incomes add to the already rapidly growing circulations of capital throughout Mustang. While for decades the import of Chinese and Tibetan goods into Mustang was loosely regulated on a tax-free basis, new consumer practices and cash circulations fuel an escalating quantity of Chinese imports. This economic dynamic motivated the Nepali state to implement unprecedented customs duties and tax policies in 2015. And now, roads are being expanded and dry-ports constructed to further grow trans-border and international trade through Mustang. Collectively, these experiences, alongside new bureaucratic interactions with the Nepali and Chinese states across the trans-Himalaya, constitute fundamental experiences with borderland modernity in Mustang today.

Recent transformations in trade and consumer practices between Mustang and Tibet also provide a view into the ways in which capital, money, and state administration mediate social relations for a variety of actors across a range of scales. The actors involved include Chinese and Tibetan wholesalers, bulk traders and household buyers from Mustang, and tax officers, customs agents, and bureaucrats in service of the state. In order to see how these relations have changed and in what ways they help constitute the Nepali (and Chinese) state, in this chapter I looked at how trade and consumption happens in a multitude of places – from what people buy at both the tsongra and in Kathmandu, to the Chinese home-goods that characterize Mustang’s domestic spaces, and to further considerations on the expansion of regional trade and international shipping routes between China, Nepal, and India. In so doing, I have also added the stories from
various actors’ relationships with commodities, money, and the state into the context of a place-based and ethnographically informed border biography (Megoran 2012) for the trans-Himalaya.

Fueled by the continual growth of Chinese imports to Nepal, new dynamics of cross-border trade and government taxation have generated an unprecedented presence of the Nepali state in Mustang, but one inextricable from material and political interventions of China. Identifying the challenges of state territorialization in the borderlands of High Asia, van Schendel notes that “control of space, or rather the practice of territoriality, is at the core of the modern state. Territoriality, a strategy to control resources and people by controlling area, becomes problematic at the edges of that area, where it is challenged by the neighboring state’s territoriality” (van Schendel in Gellner 2013: 267). By looking at the expanding connections between commodities, consumption, taxation, and bureaucracy, it thus becomes possible ‘see the state’ (Corbridge et al. 2005) – or multiple states – in a place like Mustang where state presence heretofore maintained a limited visibility, if not a conspicuous absence.

Significant changes in consumption practices in Mustang over the past several decades – but especially since the completion of operational roads in 2014 – have also transformed social and political relationships across a range of spatial scales. These transformations connect habits of the body and home to broader entanglements of national integration and state formation, international development, and regional geopolitics. For example, new consumer preferences in Mustang for Chinese motorcycles, ready-made clothing, synthetic blankets, and digital televisions have reshaped physical appearances at personal levels, altered domestic spaces as reflected in modern home décor with Chinese furnishings, re-positioned Mustang’s populations as taxable subjects of the Nepali state, and helped to situate Nepal as one component of a much
larger spatial fix for China’s over-accumulation of surplus capital, a project increasingly leveraged through the One Belt One Road Initiative (Economist 2017; Khattak 2016).

Before the articulation of OBOR, however, and in response to new commodity movements, cash flows, and consumer practices, the Nepali state initiated bureaucratic institutions and legal frameworks to regulate transactions, expand circulations, control accumulation, and collect revenue through the generation of profits. In Mustang, this material-territorial operation can be seen as the distinct infrastructural effects (Painter 2006) of Kathmandu in a highland space. Throughout this chapter, I examined a number of new development projects and bureaucratic systems that reflect state commitments to the recirculation and accumulation of capital as well as the production of state space: construction of a dry port at Nyechung to accommodate growing Chinese commodity purchases; the relaxation of regulations over tourism to Upper Mustang (but continuation of expensive trekking permits to maintain tourism revenues); new customs duties, excise taxes, and registration requirements over illegal Chinese motorcycles; and new import taxes levied over higher volume tsongra imports.

Examining this circulation and consumption of everyday material things between Mustang and Tibet sheds new light on the ways in which power operates spatially. Reflecting wider processes of state institutionalization that affect everyday life in the Tibet-Mustang borderlands, the mobilities of trade and containments of regulation represent new productions and mastery of state space through the capitalization and control of borderland territory. Specifically, the spatial operations of power between China and Nepal shows that territorialization constitutes a practice of mastering space conducted by state administrations for the control of capital and the management of citizen subjects. Moreover, just as the everyday consumption of material things is constitutive to both social relations and subject positions in
capitalist systems (Hetherington 2007), the control of political economies is also central to state making. When this kind of state making happens in borderland regions, it also reflects how the border is seen, utilized, and practiced as its own kind of resource.

With a view towards borders rather than state centers, this chapter looked at socio-cultural and political-economic dynamics between Nepal and China to see how the territorialization of state space happens in material ways. In response to new market processes and sites of accumulation advanced by national and international investments in road networks, trade systems, and other infrastructural projects between Mustang and Tibet, interest in the borderlands has been renewed from Kathmandu. Importantly, this interest is made largely in the context of international business opportunities and the collection of taxes on imports and tourism. Amidst these transformations, foreign development interventions are happening in places where the Nepali state has been largely unseen beyond remote regulation of salt trades, tourism economies, and border making. Building on previous chapters’ examinations of road systems and border regimes, this chapter further set the groundwork for closer analysis of how new circulations of other Chinese goods – namely humanitarian aid and broader development interventions – also help to reshape both geographical imaginations and geopolitical relations across the trans-Himalaya. That is, Chinese investments in Mustang both complicate and help to coordinate the role of Nepali state bureaucracies and underscore the ways in which Chinese capital and commerce make new space for Nepali state formation in the Mustang-Tibet borderlands.
Chapter 5

Aid

“China wants us to want their stuff”

Earthquake emergencies, international aid, and ethnic geopolitics

Just before noon on April 25, 2015, a 7.8m earthquake struck Gorkha District in central Nepal. At the time of the event, I was transferring vehicles between the Upper Mustang villages of Syangboche and Samar where the Jomsom-Lo Monthang road was closed due to late season snowpack and mudslides. Feeling the earth shake but ignorant of the larger seismic activity in the country, my fellow passengers and I assumed the motion was caused by road construction equipment that was scheduled to reopen the road later that day. As rocks began to rain down from overhead, the earth continued to wobble and we watched cascades of mud, dirt, and dust fall from cliff faces in several directions around us. Quite wrong in our initial assessment, we quickly realized that something far more severe was happening.

Although the quake epicenter in Gorkha was barely 100 kilometers from Jomsom, damage across Mustang was relatively minor compared to more severe devastation elsewhere in the country. No casualties were reported in Mustang as a direct result of the earthquake and in most villages, structural failure was characterized by cracking to earthen walls rather than the complete collapse of buildings. This general condition led the Government of Nepal and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to classify Mustang as a “not severely affected district.” Due to this designation and because the state of emergency was not especially acute in Mustang, national and international relief was not immediately directed or delivered to the district. Despite relatively minor damage but concerned about ongoing
aftershocks, in the week following the initial earthquakes, villagers across Mustang minimized their time indoors and spent nights sleeping under the open skies in central community grounds.

Map 5.1 Estimated Affected Areas of April 25, 2015 Earthquake in Nepal

Following the initial earthquake, for the next five days I slowly made my way south and out of Mustang district. Once I was able to retrieve my motorcycle from the wrong side of a landslide (and transport it down valley via a tractor able to ford the Kali Gandaki River and avoid further road closures), I spent several days conducting informal and rapid damage appraisals of structures throughout Mustang’s southern villages. Starting on April 28, I made a series of single-day trips to villages within a 5-10 kilometer triangle between Jomsom, Kagbeni, and Muktinath to check on the status of friends and friends-of-friends who remained without power and, therefore, out of touch with worried relatives in both Kathmandu and overseas. During this time, I encountered a few, small Nepali Police details who had been dispatched to
assess damage to buildings throughout the district. While these responders’ efforts were earnest, their methodologies were hard to discern and, like me, they did not appear to have prior experience in an earthquake disaster context. On April 30, I left the Tibetan refugee village of Tsairok on my motorcycle for a two-day drive back to Kathmandu. Following the routinely rough but relatively unscathed road through the Kali Gandaki gorge down to Beni, I was surprised but relieved to encounter relatively minor damage to buildings, homes, and other roads along the way. Having heard many accounts of damages across the Kathmandu Valley and media reports of national devastation, I was astonished to also discover that Pokhara escaped the earthquakes relatively unharmed.

It was on the drive from Pokhara back to Kathmandu that I began to witness the unevenness and asymmetry of relief across the country, which I wrote about the next day and subsequently published in the *Savage Minds* online anthropology blog (Murton 2016c):

Yesterday the children of Pokhara returned to school while mass burials and cremations continued in Gorkha, Lamjung, Nuwakot, and elsewhere. This return to normalcy in Nepal’s most scenic city is essential, and yet nothing is in fact normal. Tourists are in short supply and yet the shopowners of Lakeside sit in vacant showrooms, eagerly awaiting their return. Everyday conversations tend towards the mundane again – the price of petrol, the pre-monsoon weather – and yet the specter of disaster looms everywhere – where were you when IT happened? Are you and your family and your home alright? What about the village? Did you lose anyone?

In driving from Pokhara to Kathmandu, one could be forgiven for not knowing what had happened. Aside from an utter dearth of vehicles, from Machhapuchhre to Manakamana there is hardly any noticeable damage. There is no roadside carnage. There are no international NGO relief vehicles. There is no Nepal Army response. Nothing of the sort...

Just to the north a mere several kilometers away, the scene is vastly and ghastly different. Here, in the communities of Gorkha, Lamjung, Dading, Nuwakot, and Rasuwa, devastation is an understatement. As Kathryn March lamented, villages are gone. Lives are lost, homes destroyed, infrastructures obliterated. And yet why are the roads so empty…where are the big white Toyota Landcruisers so ubiquitous in global crises from Port-au-Prince to Darfur to Kathmandu? Where is this “global response,” the outpouring of hearts, tears, and cash from the international community? What is happening?

The hills of Nepal are crying but why aren’t we listening?

Take a good look at a map and a calendar together. Outside of Gorkha and Lamjung, the most heavily affected areas of this earthquake were located in relatively close proximity to Kathmandu…Dhading and Nuwakot, Rasuwa and Sindhupalchowk. Like Kathmandu, they are all within the Bagmati Zone, and thus within a day’s drive from the capital. And yet we have heard time and again (and again) that the people of these places have received no significant relief…

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At a moment of high anxiety and utter despondency, I contributed this reflection in order to process (and vent) the frustration that was so widely felt across the country. Although international relief efforts were finally getting to the most critical places in need one week after the initial earthquakes, an agonizing number of villages continued to wait for help that wasn’t (and might never be) on its way. However, in stark contrast to the shortcomings of the humanitarian-industrial complex under the direction of an ill-prepared and overwhelmed Nepali government, ultra-grassroots and community-based groups were effectively reaching places that had been rendered a blank on the humanitarian relief map. Social media, international financial networks, and compassion in action facilitated this impressive local-global response (Streep 2015).

The 2015 earthquakes disrupted everything in Nepal. They disrupted geopolitical relations between Kathmandu, Beijing, and Delhi. They disrupted international interventions of humanitarian relief and development aid across the country. They disrupted the national political climate and accelerated the promulgation of a dubious constitution. They disrupted social relations and community service organizations as people waited and waited for help that was slow to arrive. And they disrupted my dissertation research by shifting access to field sites, inspiring new experiences with engaged-scholarship,¹ and leading to the suspension of a major research grant. In countless places and ways, the earthquakes proved Neil Smith’s words to be ever true, “that there is no such thing as a natural disaster.”

Across almost all of earthquake affected Nepal, it quickly became apparent that, “at all phases, up to and including reconstruction, disasters don’t simply flatten landscapes, washing them smooth. Rather they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter” (N. Smith 2006). As the Nepali state struggled to leverage an outpouring of international aid to

¹ I soon became a more active ‘accidental humanitarian’ myself (see Lord and Murton 2017).
address the needs of its citizens, and the ruts of social difference grew deeper, new spaces
opened both physically and figuratively across the national landscape. The first to fill many of
these gaps was Beijing, as the earthquakes heralded altogether new engagements between Nepal
and China that continue to grow closer and larger more than two years after the seismic episodes.

Figure 5.1 Earthquake damage to Royal Palace and ACAP Office, Lo Monthang

Source: Photo by author (June 2015)

In the case of Mustang, earthquake aid was delivered through a combination of
community-based responders, modest government support, and new Chinese state
humanitarianism. Despite a district-wide assessment as *not* severely affected, damage to
buildings and other local infrastructures in Mustang’s villages of Ghilling and Namgyal as well
as Lo Monthang was nevertheless significant and widespread. Through the Chief District Officer
of Mustang, the Government of Nepal provided a modest NRs 70,000 in financial support to the
district (Murton 2016b). Largely left off the international NGO relief map and with a central
government severely underprepared to manage a crisis at the national scale, communities in
Ghilling and Namgyal launched grassroots efforts to solicit and deliver aid from relatives, friends,
and donors in Kathmandu and abroad. When I returned to Mustang in July, two contingents of Lo-ba communities from New York City had arrived to help. One group, Sakya Relief Fund, handed out cash donations in the amount of NRs 3000 (US $30) to those in need across a range of villages. The other, Yul-lha, focused its efforts in Ghilling and Namgyal and, in addition to the delivery of in-kind donations, the group provided organization and funding for direct rebuilding efforts in both villages.²

*Figure 5.2 Tents, solar units, and other earthquake relief mobilized by Yul-lha from USA*

In concert with this local organization, Chinese officials in Dongbochen on the Tibet side of the Nepal-China border also responded, sending earthquake relief to Upper Mustang via border officials stationed with the Armed Police Force in Likse. In early May, this Chinese humanitarian aid was delivered to the Kora La, including food, temporary shelters, small solar panels and other supplies.

² As a contributor to the Yul-lha relief effort, I transported several duffel bags of tents, sleeping bags, and portable solar panel units from Boulder, Colorado to Ghilling and Namgyal. The founder of Yul-lha is a friend and the founder’s younger brother was my research assistant.
electricity units, dry cement, and sheets of corrugated galvanized iron (CGI). In June, a meeting between local Lo-ba leaders and representatives from the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu was held at the Lo Monthang community center to determine what, if anything, the Embassy could also provide that was further required by Mustang’s earthquake affected population. According to Nepali Congress leaders in Mustang as well as the politically active president of the Lo Monthang Youth Club, by the end of the summer it was determined that no further Chinese earthquake aid was necessary and that interventions should instead continue through other humanitarian assistance and infrastructural development programs.

Figure 5.3 Chinese earthquake relief used for temporary shelter tent in Namgyal Village

China’s earthquake emergency assistance to Nepal builds directly upon a series of new precedents set in recent years between Beijing and Kathmandu. For example, in 2013, the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu renewed a pilot 5-year food aid plan to Nepal’s northern districts (Data 2010; Post 2009). In 2014, China became Nepal’s largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Xinhuanet 2014a). Following 2015, when Beijing launched its largest-ever
international humanitarian effort in response to the Nepal earthquakes (Tiezzi 2015), in the first half of the 2016-17 fiscal year, Nepal received over 2/3rds of its total FDI from China (Xinhuanet 2017; Sharma 2014). Furthermore, several new road and hydropower projects between Nepal and Chinese Tibet are predicted to go online before 2018 (Ghimire 2016; Shrestha 2015). Since 2015, ongoing Chinese efforts to provide humanitarian assistance, restore infrastructure, and reopen transport corridors with Nepal symbolizes Beijing’s increasingly close relationship with Kathmandu and demonstrates how China’s new humanitarian actors successfully filled a void left open by both the Government of Nepal and the international aid sector.

This chapter follows the trajectory and recent acceleration of Chinese aid and infrastructural investment to Nepal to argue that Kathmandu accepts and leverages Chinese assistance for its own state-making purposes while at the same time Beijing gains extra-territorial power in return for its aid packages. Bearing in mind the dialectical tensions between mobility and containment, I analyze the ways in which China has scaled up its investment and development portfolio in Nepal and how doing so advances Nepali state formation in modes both physical (infrastructural capacity) and discursive (bikas-based ‘modernity’). In view of this relationship, I place Nepali state-making underwritten by Chinese investment in tension with broader conversations on the “gift of development” (Yeh 2013) and Beijing’s anxieties over Tibetan exile populations in Nepal (Watch 2014). I do this to show how extra-territoriality and sovereignty intersect via development, particularly in the context of China’s previous “Going Out” strategy (Yeh and Wharton 2016) transforming into its even larger and new One Belt One Road (Belt and Road) Initiative.

After situating Nepal’s uneven experiences with development in the context of China’s gift of development, I examine Chinese interventions in Nepal since 2009-10 at three key
registers: 1) Nepal’s earthquake emergency, grassroots and geopolitical humanitarianism, and the bureaucratic state; 2) Chinese aid to Nepal and the routes of delivery; and 3) connections between ethnically-oriented geopolitical concerns and extra-territoriality articulated within the 2016 Joint Agreement between Nepal and China. By looking at grounded experiences with Chinese investment and development interventions in Mustang and across Nepal, I show how Beijing’s development gifts to Kathmandu helps to consolidate soft power abroad. In turn, this power shapes the extra-territorial power that Beijing wields over Tibetan exile populations and furthermore advances Chinese claims for rights to hydropower and extractive industry development in Nepal.

*Figure 5.4 Billboard at Zhangmu-Kodari border directly promoting Chinese soft power via aid*[^3]

![Billboard at Zhangmu-Kodari border directly promoting Chinese soft power via aid](image)

Source: Photo by author (December 2014)

### 3.1 Infrastructure Dreaming and the Gift of (Chinese) Development in Nepal

Infrastructure development advanced by international investment is central to processes of state formation. As discussed in Chapter 1 (particularly in the context of roads but also in

[^3]: Billboard states: “To promote the national soft power, to enhance the friendly ties between China and Nepal.”
regards to other infrastructures) and fundamental to the Nepal political imaginary, national
development is expressed through promises of infrastructure that facilitate economic
connectivity. Today, this imaginary is increasingly linked to China (Post 2016; Transportation
2016). Foreshadowing the national priorities of Nepal’s Strategic Road Network (Roads 2014),
Harka Gurung’s 2005 Nepal Regional Strategy for Development Report released by the Asian
Development Bank states:

Development planning has to encompass the totality of national space...land use planning should
constitute an essential part of national planning to optimize exploitation of regional resources....
(An) important aspect of spatial framework that determines the future pattern of development
relates to road infrastructure. In spatial planning terms, the East-West Highway should be
developed as the spine of national development with the connecting north-south roads as a series
of ribs for lateral diffusion. Some of these should be extended further north giving priority to those
that can provide access to future sites of hydropower generation. It is necessary to provide road
access from the Tibet Autonomous Region of China (TAR) to some remote areas to exploit recent
developments across the border (Gurung 2005: x).

While infrastructure is dreamed as a viable way to bring development, or bikas, to Nepali
populations, the fantasy that infrastructure guarantees development – or what Harvey and Knox
identify as the “enchantments of infrastructure” (Harvey and Knox 2012) – as promoted by this
ADB report continues to motivate national and international development projects across the
trans-Himalaya. Moreover, the advancement of this kind of development agenda is increasingly
underwritten by different conceptions of security – primarily economic development for Nepal
and the control of Tibetan populations for China – and both Kathmandu and Beijing see trans-
border infrastructure and trade as expedient and mutually beneficial bilateral avenues to meet
these convergent interests (Sharma 2014, 2016).

A target of international development interventions for decades (Fujikura 2013), Nepal
has a long and complex experience with foreign aid that has only grown more complicated,
corrupt, and contested since the end of the Maoist civil war (Jha 2014). Nepal’s modern history
since the mid-20th century has been characterized by socio-political and economic precarity
largely conditioned by legacies of casteism/racism, obstructionist bureaucracies, and long-term dependencies on foreign aid and international development (Bell 2014). This socio-political equation has led to especially diverse and uneven experiences with international development, including serial problems associated with misunderstandings of Nepal’s rich ethnic diversity (Bista 1991; Gellner 2007; Hangen 2011). The extensive development projects that Nepal has received as aid since the 1950s have largely been financed by large multilateral organizations (e.g. World Bank and Asian Development Bank) and international governmental aid institutions (e.g. United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UK Department for International Development (DFID), and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)) as well as myriad smaller NGO projects (Hagen 2012). Amidst a protracted, political quagmire, development interventions in Nepal have more recently become characterized by projects sponsored by the country’s historically rival and increasingly globally active neighbors, China and India (Singh 2009; Kumar 2011).

Complicating a bloated development landscape, Nepal has struggled to establish a stable and legitimate government even ten years after the cease-fire on the country’s decade-long civil war (Einsiedel, Malone, and Pradhan 2012). Following a long period of intense political volatility – characterized not only by the Maoist war but also the deposition of the Hindu monarchy, the collapse and paralysis of successive Constituent Assemblies, and deepening problems of bureaucracy and rent-seeking at all levels – the Government of Nepal remains unstable (Lawoti 2007; Parajulee 2000; Hangen 2007). At the time of writing, the country has proceeded with local elections despite ongoing challenges to and disputes over the appropriate model of territorial governance or federalism (Paudel 2015). Especially troublesome is Nepal’s new constitution and the conditions for citizenship (and statelessness) established therein
(discussed in Chapter 1), all of which generated immediate and severe opposition due to the marginalized status it conferred upon both women and ethnic minority or janajati groups (International Crisis Group 2016).

Seeking some kind of unity and recognition as a viable entity both before the 2015 earthquakes and after, the Nepali state is increasingly compelled to engage with projects that reinforce its ability and right to govern – and infrastructure development is widely envisioned as the panacea. The Government of Nepal’s most recent 5-Year Strategic Plan (Transportation 2016) is but the latest reiteration of infrastructural priorities – or enchantments – as outlined in the 2005 ADB Report Nepal Regional Strategy for Development (Gurung 2005). Particularly in the context of ongoing political and economic instability, the Nepalese state continues to collaborate with a variety of actors – from global aid organizations to sovereign wealth funds to Chinese transnational firms – to provide an infrastructural gift of development alongside discursive, social, and material bikas to its population. Across these scales, gifts are exchanged and promises are made – especially in the interest of state security – further solidifying asymmetrical relationships of power between participating states as well as between the Nepali state and its citizens.

Trans-border trade and transportation infrastructure underwritten with international investment are thus central to Nepal’s vision of security, and security is both a basis and objective of state-making. Following discussions in Chapter 2 on the centrality of roads to processes of national state-making as well as further analysis in Chapter 4 on regimes and practices of territorialization, this chapter considers state-making to be the practices and processes by which the Government of Nepal territorializes state space through development and thereby expands state presence both bureaucratically and financially. Through both the physical
development and discursive currency of infrastructural interventions, the Nepali state advances its own legitimacy across landscapes and over populations themselves. The administrative effects (Painter 2010) that constitute this territoriality are established and maintained by new bureaucratic entities that also enable the state to be seen (Corbridge et al. 2005). By enrolling the citizenry in national projects of growth and improvement – consistently articulated in Nepal as *bikas* – these development efforts continue to define Nepal’s state making agenda, repositioning citizens so that they are legible to the state, active in capital production and accumulation, and subject to new interventions directed by Kathmandu policy makers as well as foreign actors. While for rural and borderland populations the Nepali state has long been paradoxically marked by its absence, this legacy is rapidly changing, most conspicuously through infrastructure development.

Efforts to reinforce state legitimacy and thereby improve the relationship between the Nepali state and its citizens are often predicated on the Nepali notion of *bikas*, or development. “Coalescing over several decades and numerous political struggles, this rhetoric [of development] has come to equate the legitimacy of the government with national unity, progress, and patriotism itself. A particular arrangement for control over resources and political alliances thus became inextricably linked to the unassailable cause of national development” (Pigg 1993: 49). As Pigg (1993) further argues, the lived definition of *bikas* is closely connected with material goods and the flow of these goods from elsewhere, which results in distinctions between places where development has arrived and places where it has not. Politically, the delivery of *bikas* therefore remains a common and politically potent promise, expressed in terms of roads, market access, economic growth, hydropower development, drinking water projects, schools, health posts, and other material tangibles.
As in many other areas of Nepal, the process of infrastructure development in Mustang is driving important shifts in socio-political relationships and socio-economic distinctions “as people move in and out of spaces of bikas” (Pigg 1992: 510). Given long histories of government malfeasance, many rural and highland communities view the material process of infrastructure development as a way of “getting bikas” or an opportunity for state participation, and therefore rights (Shneiderman 2013). As in many rural districts of Nepal, bikas has long been promised but rarely realized in Mustang, a reality elegantly described in Manjushree Thapa’s autoethnography of her time working with an NGO in Mustang (2008) and reiterated to me by numerous research informants from a host of demographic profiles.

As I heard both from young men in Lo Monthang and elder farmers in Dhi, “We have waited and waited for the Government to bring development. But not much ever comes from Kathmandu.” While statements like these were commonplace, they were frequently followed by recognition of where development in Mustang typically comes from – foreign donors. From schools in Lo Monthang and Choesor sponsored by the Indian and Chinese Embassies, respectively, to Korean-NGO led waste-management efforts, Italian-NGO sponsored schools, and American-NGO directed monastery restoration projects, development as physical infrastructure, educational opportunity, and even cultural preservation was routinely identified as coming from outside Nepal rather than Kathmandu itself. And now in Mustang more than ever before, more of this development assistance is identified as ‘Chinese’ – solar power stations, road improvement projects, earthquake relief materials, food aid packages, and so forth.

Today, international tourism and trans-border trade are also significantly changing Mustang’s historical center-periphery relationship with Kathmandu and can be considered as harbingers of greater aid interventions. Accelerated by road infrastructure development, tourism
and trade leads to more international awareness of development interests. This awareness translates into an international development-infrastructure cycle, as greater foreign participation in development programs generates more capital flow that in turn motivates closer state observation, administrative intervention, and additional international NGO programs, all of which comes to be seen and known as bikas. That is, where tourists and business go, so too go the NGOs, donor agencies, and Nepali state.

In Mustang and elsewhere in Nepal, the experiences with and transitions of bikas take place amidst a changing mix of political rights and economic incentives, increasingly brought forth by a joint Sino-Nepali gift of development. This chapter argues that Nepal’s long and complex history with international development is changing as a result of Chinese foreign aid and investment. The special nature of Nepal-China relations is strongly characterized by infrastructure development – shaped largely as transportation and hydropower (Wikileaks 2012) – and shared visions of expanding international trade corridors between China and South Asia (Murton, Lord, and Beazley 2016). In contrast to previous Western models of development in Nepal, Chinese aid to Nepal is formed through a collaboration of state-sponsored aid and private finance deployed through the work of trans-national construction firms. Going back to the Trade Agreements and Border Treaties of the 1960s (Jain 1981), the material and ideological constituent parts of Chinese aid together generate complex equations of power that shape Sino-Nepal relations and that explicitly reference “friendship” and “mutual respect for state sovereignty” (Post 2016). Predicated on alliances and gifts made on the basis of bilateral agreements between Nepali and Chinese state officials and corporate leaders, these relationships provide soft loans to Nepal, construction contracts to Chinese firms, and political capital
increasingly leveraged by Beijing in Kathmandu in exchange for Chinese support of Nepal’s own state making projects.

Discussing the ways that development efforts sponsored by the Chinese state in Tibet reflect unequal power relations, Emily Yeh dissects the discourse of development as gift in the Tibet Autonomous Region of the PRC. Reframing the discourse on the gift of development to reflect the relationship between a state and its citizens, or different kinds of citizens, Yeh asserts that the narrative of the gift reifies the state and establishes power relations that “transforms a donor’s status from that of the dominant to the generous” (2013: 15). “The grammar of the gift posits an intersubjective relationship between the state as giver and its citizens as recipients; it thus works to produce the effect of the state as a reified, unitary actor with an ontological presence. This reification of the state calls into being the recognition of a relationship of belonging and thus works to consolidate state space as territory” (Yeh 2013: 267).

Sino-Nepal relations are today closer than at any other point in the last fifty years and these relations are increasingly expressed through infrastructure projects that are financed, built, or supported by Chinese interests. A significant turn began in 2014, the year in which Nepal became an early signatory to China’s One Belt One Road Initiative (R. Adhikari 2015) and the first time Chinese foreign direct investment to Nepal eclipsed that of India (Xinhuanet 2014a). Particularly in the context of recent nationalist narratives in Kathmandu and fueled by former Prime Minister K.P. Oli’s political antagonism towards Delhi and strong diplomatic overtures towards Beijing (Dixit 2016), China increasingly figures as a major partner of a sovereign Nepal (Marlen 2016). While the objective of this chapter is not to historicize and dissect the complex geopolitics of China and India in Nepal up to the present moment, it is necessary to recognize how historical antagonisms between Beijing and Delhi and increasingly strong-armed and
nationalist leadership across Asia (Roth 2016) condition the geopolitical logics that shape international development and emergency interventions in Nepal.

2014-15 was a particularly low point in Indo-Nepali relations. In the early 2000s, breaking the shackles of Indian political and economic influence in Kathmandu, and especially the high-caste cronyism between Nepali and Indian elites, became a central and provocative pillar of Maoist revolutionary discourse and a desired outcome across many of Nepal’s constituent populations. In more recent years, relations between Kathmandu and Delhi have continued to be mercurial, and changes in government leadership in Delhi (especially Narendra Modi’s BJP party usurping power from Indira Ghandi’s India Congress party) as well as Kathmandu (shifting parliamentary majorities and subsequent ministerial transfers between the embittered Maoists, Nepali Congress, and United Marxist Leninst parties) have translated into ongoing friction between Nepal and India.

The earthquake and its aftermath then exacerbated these existing tensions in manifold ways. While Delhi and Beijing both maneuvered strategically to provide the greatest quantities of earthquake aid to Nepal (Giri 2015a, 2015b), the jockeying for position ultimately ended in China’s favor, but not in predictable ways. Indian influence in Nepal reached its nadir as a result of violent protests across the Terai amidst Madhesi demands for constitutional rights, especially as the Fall 2015 fuel blockade was systematically blamed on Indian interference. At the time, citizens across Kathmandu could be heard complaining about the “Indian fuel blockade” and Modi’s orchestration of the ‘energy emergency’ (Samiti 2015). In fact, and as more thorough investigations revealed, the blockade was discovered to be collusion between Madhesi activists, the Nepali Police, and select members of the Kathmandu establishment (Rinck and Adhikari 2016).
Anti-Indian accusations were gratuitously promoted in the Nepali press, and especially by more nationalist journals, fueling the proverbial fire and placing blame for Kathmandu’s fundamental (and often self-made) troubles on its most convenient scapegoat – Delhi’s political class (Pandey 2015). The day to day experience of this fuel crises was a 300-500% inflation in gasoline and diesel prices, a severe limitation of propane and kerosene cooking gas, and the virtual shut-down of all construction industry. It was during this moment of political and energy emergencies that the Embassy of China intervened (in ways more symbolic than substantive) and delivered a dozen tankers of fuel to Nepal, via the newly opened and highly important Rasuwa-Kyirong border (Samiti 2015). This fuel relief was just one point in a broader geopolitical configuration by which Chinese strategic actions helped to relieve Nepal’s post-earthquake crises, exploited Indian vulnerability in Kathmandu, and enabled Beijing to fill new political space in Nepal through aid and infrastructural interventions. The following section examines the means and methods of some more of these Chinese interventions more closely.

5.2 Earthquake Emergencies, Grassroots Humanitarianism, and the Bureaucratic State

The Nepal earthquakes were disruptive in geopolitical, social, and constitutional terms. By recalibrating relationships between international aid, state building, and national citizenship, the earthquakes set in motion new experiences with bureaucracy and territory for Nepal’s affected communities and foreign aid workers alike. This section examines the 2015 Nepali earthquakes to better understand how disasters create spaces of emergency that are then filled through state making processes of national administration, international humanitarianism, and infrastructural (re)solutions.
Geopolitics strongly affected the emergency relief phase of the Nepal earthquake crises, with both India and China vying to provide first response in particular districts. Adding to rather than alleviating the pressure of the moment, foreign embassies leaned on the Government of Nepal and UN to either block or allow particular air-serviced humanitarian efforts in sensitive borderland areas. A case of geopolitical sensitivities shaping humanitarian operations, the United Nations and World Food Program designated specific regions for India and China to operate their respective relief efforts. This territorialization of emergency space was colorfully illustrated by a map I encountered at the weekly meeting of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at the central compound of the Nepali Army in Kathmandu.

Map 5.2 UN/WFP humanitarian relief map and territorialization of Nepal’s emergency space

Source: Photo by author (May 2015)

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4 Frustrated by inexplicable prohibitions on flight space to Kathmandu and use of open tarmac at Tribhuvan International Airport, at OCHA meetings at the Nepal Army Club in May 2015, I witnessed intense arguments between ranking leadership of the UK, US, and Japanese militaries regarding the deployment of relief units to particular districts in need.
National confusion and organizational disarray in Nepal’s earthquake emergency opened critical space for Chinese and other humanitarian interventions. Despite numerous international efforts to deliver massive amounts of relief aid, political infighting and perennial nepotism complicated initial response and paralyzed ongoing reconstruction efforts (Shakya 2016). While the International Conference on Nepal’s Reconstruction (ICNR) garnered $4.6 billion from the international community for earthquake reconstruction – including a $1 billion pledge from Delhi that doubled Beijing’s $480 million donation (Giri 2015b) – more than one year later in April 2016, not a single dollar of that aid had been deployed for specific projects or distributed to communities in need (Caprara 2016; Sangroula 2016).

Following the ICNR, the promulgation of a Nepali Constitution became a key condition for the allocation of this international aid. Motivated by a powerful cash carrot, elites from the major political parties quickly drafted and approved a controversial constitution in August 2015 that neglected, if not outright ignored, the very provisions for minority rights that had delayed the constitutional promulgation for nearly nine years. Not to be sold on this expeditious effort of political maneuvering, opposition parties representing gender activists (women and LGBT), indigenous and tribal groups or “scheduled castes” (janajatis), and leadership from large minority populations (Madhesi) began to agitate (International Crisis Group 2016). Protests in southern Nepal quickly turned violent, with over 50 dead, and by October 2015 resulted in blockades and trade embargoes at Nepal’s border crossings with India, where Madhesi populations are concentrated (Mukherjee 2016). As discussed above, a significant outcome of post-constitution protests and blockades was the national fuel crisis and nearly complete paralysis of reconstruction efforts across Nepal. As such, earthquake reconstruction, road repairs, hydropower development, and other infrastructure programs came to a stand still (Shrestha 2015).
Concurrent with protests in southern Nepal, gas shortages across the country, and astonishing negligence from Kathmandu’s political leadership, government action towards earthquake reconstruction took shape solely in bureaucratic form. In December 2015, the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) evolved into the Housing Reconstruction and Recovery Platform (HRRP). The Government of Nepal appointed Sushil Gyawali – a career technocrat with limited experience in housing, reconstruction, or development – as CEO of the NRA-HRRP (Sangroula 2015). Within days of his appointment, Gyawali held a public meeting for members of the international aid and earthquake reconstruction committee. At this meeting, I met and observed many members of the government and NGO aid sector, including country and project directors from USAID (USA), GIZ (Germany), GOAL (Ireland), and JICA (Japan) as well as UNICEF, Save the Children, and International Red Cross/Red Crescent. Interestingly and marking a significant absence, neither India nor China had embassy representatives or NGO workers in attendance. Amidst platitudes about commitments to reconstruction and intentions to move deliberately and efficiently, on January 10, 2016, Gyawali announced that no post-earthquake reconstruction would officially commence, and no relief money would be directly distributed to earthquake victims, until at least April 25, 2016 – one year to the day from the initial earthquakes (Sangroula 2016).

Amidst the transition between the NRA and HRRP, both Nepal’s constituency and the international community learned, directly and disappointingly, that it would take the Government of Nepal at the very least a full twelve months to commence post-earthquake reconstruction of its country – and this only if things actually started happening in late-April. Instead of working in earnest towards national reconstruction, Gyawali identified the need to establish district and village level committees to conduct feasibility studies that would then inform planning meetings
towards the designation of actual reconstruction programs. Or, rather, the reconstruction of Nepal would wait for the standard cycles of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and money to run their course. As a result of ongoing delays coupled with bureaucratic obfuscation, the rhetorical but increasingly sincere question I heard from friends in Kathmandu asked what would be left of the $4.6 billion in aid pledged at the ICNR after the one-year anniversary. As one friend said, “the longer the money sits in donors’ hands, the less they will want to give. But also, the longer the money is in the Government’s hands, the more will disappear. What are we to do (ke garne)?” At one point, speculation in Kathmandu also questioned if another conference should be held to increase pledges to $6.7 billion, the total amount of relief aid required according to the Government of Nepal’s Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (Giri 2015a; Editors 2016).

First for months and now for years, the Government of Nepal’s primary response to the earthquake emergency has been the creation of new bureaucracies. Unable to effectively orchestrate a major humanitarian effort and incapable of delivering adequate aid to its population, the Government relied upon and accepted tremendous amounts of international relief, and then did nothing with the donations for an agonizing length of time. While monies pledged at the INCR were indeterminately suspended, in-kind materials donated from around the world sat exposed on the tarmac at Nepal’s one international airport, soaked and rotting under monsoon rains and then frozen under the coldest winter months in recent memory. However, in order to restore vestiges of legitimacy both for the international community and its own citizens, the Nepali state formed new agencies to plan for reconstruction. Made through a process of slow mobilization and symbolizing how new state effects were shaped in response to the earthquake, these agencies included numerous bureaucratic offices such as the HRRP and the NRA.
Famously frustrated by the Nepali government’s response (or lack thereof) to the earthquake emergency, Nepal’s civil society proved itself to be one of the most effective players in the overall disaster response and longer-term post-earthquake reconstruction effort. Largely because of the weak and unreliable actions of the Government of Nepal, numerous villages across Nepal commenced reconstruction altogether outside of the official and formal mechanisms of the NRA and HRRP. Operating outside of the NRA-HRRP frameworks jeopardized many earthquake-affected families’ ability to receive state charity (promised to be 3-5 lakh NRs or approximately US$ $3000-5000) because it violated the Prime Minister’s order to rebuild only in accordance with – and having received prior approval for reconstruction from – the HRRP. Nevertheless, such cavalier and bootstrap action was by and large the only way to get things done in Nepal even twelve months after the first earthquakes. This is what Dinesh Paudel has identified as the “anarchy of reconstruction,” the early phase of post-emergency action in which relief efforts are small in scale, localized, spontaneous, and non-bureaucratic.5

By working and researching in Mustang and Rasuwa districts as well as Kathmandu for months following the earthquakes, I observed that trans-local grassroots reconstruction efforts were led and maintained by an eclectic and earnest array of actors. Amidst new awakenings of social justice, these “accidental humanitarians” (Lord and Murton 2017) include but are not limited to: Nepalis with international networks and access to remittance resources; philanthropic arms of Tibetan Buddhist monastic centers; outreach groups galvanized by owners and staff of the trekking industry; and innumerable members of the Kathmandu middle-class. While the actions (or inactions) of the Government of Nepal remain agonizingly frustrating in the face of ongoing earthquake-related crises, it is the direct and effective work of Nepal’s civil society that instills hope for both present and future reconstruction efforts across the country.

5 Personal communication with Dinesh Paudel in Kathmandu, Nepal; January 15, 2016.
The earthquake emergency opened new space both physically (roads to be opened, rubble to be cleared) and politically (soft power to create and anti-Indian attitudes to exploit) that was territorialized as Nepali state making and advanced with international development and aid. However, because Nepal’s Prime Minister and Ministry of Home were slow to relinquish control of those spaces for many months in 2015-16, access to the emergency for international humanitarian actors was delayed and protracted. Instead of mobilizing all resources at its disposal, the Nepali state created new bureaucratic entities such as the NRA and HRRP to master and control this new emergency space. Even though these bureaucracies completed no substantial work for months on end, their effects (Painter 2010) constituted a new form of administrative territorialization in chaotic disaster contexts under reduced standards of accountability. Once national and international agencies gained precarious footing in these new territories – and understood the bureaucratic channels by which they were negotiated – the Nepali state finally moved forward with reconstruction. Of course, this reconstruction was again
dependent on international interventions, especially financial, in-kind, and infrastructural aid from China.

5.3 Chinese Humanitarianism in Nepal and the Routes of Aid

The Nepal earthquakes of April-May 2015 broke new ground in Nepal-China relations and set a new stage for Beijing to act as a global humanitarian player. Inflicting significant damage in Nepal’s northern districts, the earthquake emergency led Beijing to mobilize its largest-ever humanitarian effort on foreign soil (Tiezzi 2015; Khatry 2015). In addition to causing nearly 9000 deaths and incalculable losses to infrastructure across both public and private spaces, the earthquakes triggered dozens of landslides and blocked all roads connecting Nepal and China – including the Arniko-Friendship Highway as well as the Rasuwa-Kyirong and the Mustang-Tibet Roads. In addition to utilizing air assets to evacuate Chinese personnel from infrastructure projects under construction in several border districts, Chinese security forces were deployed to open the only overland routes that connect Nepal and China (via Rasuwa and Sindhupalchowk). The Sino-Nepali effort to reopen these roads was prioritized in order to alleviate an economic and mobility crisis that threatened to further exacerbate Nepal’s humanitarian emergency. In June 2015, at the International Conference on Nepal’s Reconstruction, the Chinese Foreign Minister committed RMB 4.7 billion (US$ 480 million) for infrastructure repair and development across Nepal (Giri 2015a). And then in December, the delivery of Chinese petroleum to Nepal via the Kyirong-Rasuwa Highway helped to alleviate the crippling, nation-wide fuel crisis and repositioned Beijing as a willing and expedient partner for Kathmandu and alternative to Delhi.
In Mustang, the road to Tibet also enabled the delivery of Chinese aid to the district. Coordinated by Chinese officials based in Dongbochen and Likse, Tibet (and with support of the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu), informants in Mustang reported that relief materials included in-kind donations such as food staples, construction materials, and portable solar units. The components of this earthquake relief closely resemble previous aid packages provided to Nepal’s northern borderland districts according to a recently renewed Chinese five-year food aid plan (UK 2013). Moreover, this post-earthquake Chinese relief to Mustang also follows immediately upon the development of the Chinese-led solar power installation that opened in Lo Monthang in September 2015 (Pokharel 2015).

Although Chinese earthquake relief to Mustang was relatively modest, it illustrates the key role that Chinese emergency units played in Nepal’s northern borderland districts. That is, China filled a critical gap left open by the humanitarian sector in Nepal, particularly with respect to infrastructural support and aid distribution across both so-called ‘severely affected’ (e.g.
Sindupalchok and Dolakha) and ‘not severely affected’ (e.g. Rasuwa and Mustang) borderland districts. This Chinese response was a function of two key factors: first, geography and infrastructure enabled Chinese responders to reach Nepal’s northern regions as a matter of expediency via road systems and aerial support from Tibet; second, help was needed but had not been delivered to northern districts because the Government of Nepal (and the humanitarian agencies under its direction) focused efforts in districts more proximate to Kathmandu, where class and caste identities are more closely aligned with the Kathmandu elite – Bahun and Chettri – rather than ethnic minorities such as Tamang and Lo-ba (Ghale 2015). Another example of the ways in which disasters “erode and deepen the ruts of social difference they encounter” (Smith 2006), this unevenness of aid in a moment of crisis is a reflection of the structural violence that has shaped protracted neglect and uneven development of Nepal’s northern districts over time.

Beijing’s actions in the earthquake aftermath also brought about new perceptions of and engagements with China for Nepal’s citizenry as a matter of everyday experience. As I heard in villages of Rasuwa when I asked about road clearing and other emergency actions, “We needed help, and nothing came from Kathmandu. Our government never gets anything done. But China is interested in Nepal, and Beijing wanted to help. Why wouldn’t we take that assistance?” In Mustang, where populations maintain stronger Tibetan identities, the acceptance of Chinese aid was characterized by suspicious (and even conspiratorial) reservations about Beijing’s broader motives and level of influence in the district. While this first reflection (from a Tamang informant) contrasts with other attitudes I heard, especially from ethically Tibetan residents in Mustang, it also suggests the ways in which attitudes are flexible and shift as a matter of both necessity and desire – and especially in post-disaster environments.

In his study of the ways in which the 2001 Gujarat earthquake was articulated in India,
Edward Simpson argues “the stories these people eventually learned to tell about the earthquake often shared no language or an agreed upon sequence of events. The disaster became competing and contradictory forms of knowledge” (2013: 263-264). In Nepal, and particularly across districts with different levels of Tibetan heritage – as well as different earthquake ‘affectedness’ – these ‘competing and contradictory forms of knowledge’ translate into different ways in which international aid is identified, accepted, and distributed. And as the case of China shows, the 2015 earthquakes brought about a significant shift in relations in both scale and across national space. One of the most powerful effects of these Chinese aid operations is that they continue to occur in places where Nepali state presence has been limited, historically and more recently.

Various Chinese humanitarian interventions in Nepal, such as recent food aid programs, have also concentrated in borderland places where the Nepali state and Kathmandu elite have historically been all but absent. In 2009, Chinese food aid programs were launched to ten of Nepal’s northern border districts. These donations initially amounted to NRs 3 million worth of rice, wheat, salt, maize, and oats for each of the ten borderland districts (Post 2009). According to Nepal’s Ministry of Local Development (MoLD), food aid provided in 2011 – again at the amount of NRs 3 million per district – specifically mitigated regional food shortages (MoLD 2011). Under China’s “Food for Work Programme” to Nepal, this aid was distributed in the northern parts of Darchula, Humla, Bajhang, Mustang, Manang, Rasuwa, Dhading, Sindhupalchowk, Dolakha and Sankhuwasabha (Aid Data 2011). While the ‘food’ of these aid packages was donated by the Chinese state, the distribution of the food aid – or the ‘work’ part of the program – was conducted by community-level actors and coordinated through village committees.
The discourse and delivery of Chinese food aid to northern Nepal suggests both limited understanding of and yet symbolic, ongoing commitments to the initiative. Overlooking the wider, recent history of Chinese food aid to Nepal and reflecting how misunderstood these food packages remain in Kathmandu, MoLD Under Secretary Rishi Raj Acharya claimed that aid in 2011 constituted “the first time China has provided food” to Nepal (THT 2011) even though the program was launched in 2009. Reaffirmed by a MOU signed on November 26, 2010 and pointing towards longer-term commitments to this relationship, the Nepali media reported that Wu Ying Jie, deputy executive chairman of TAR, visited Local Development Minister Bahadur Rayamajhi in early 2011 to discuss the continuation of the support in coming years. “The support will continue as per the MoU,” MoLD Under Secretary Acharya stated unequivocally (THT 2011).

Food aid to Mustang began in 2009 at the NRs 3 million level, but by 2011 the financial value of this aid reached NRs 5 million (UK 2013). Launched soon after the cessation of mobile tsengra trade fairs held in Lo Monthang, food consignments were first delivered directly to Lo Monthang by Chinese officials from Zhongba County of the TAR and handed over to Secretaries of Choesor and Chonnup Village Development Committees (VDCs) as well as representatives of the District Development Committee (DDC) (UK 2013). In Mustang, the first consignments of food aid comprised rice, flour, sugar, salt, and tea. VDC representatives and members of village youth clubs redistributed the large volume donations to local residents across the district.

Although rarely an emergency situation in Mustang, food security has long been a concern in Nepal’s northern borderlands, and especially in Humla district (Grocke 2016). As Bishop (1990) notes, the need to supplement locally produced grains with the proteins provided by Tibetan livestock was a fundamental driver behind trans-Himalayan trade practices. However,
the regularization of Chinese food provisions to Mustang, in concert with shifting terms of the *tsongra* determined and dictated by Chinese authorities, suggests the possible cultivation of new dependencies in Mustang alongside the constitution of new formalities for the trade fairs. And in terms of state formation, the increased presence of Chinese goods delivered as aid packages goes hand in hand with more regular visits from Chinese state officials. These Chinese visitors are customarily met and hosted by Nepali state and district-level officers. As a matter of course, Chinese aid therefore motivates new Nepali state presence in the borderlands as well.

*Figure 5.7 Remnants of Chinese food aid in damaged storage room at Namgyal Monastery*

Source: Photo by author (June 2015)

Acknowledging that free food is hard to turn down, many members of Mustang society questioned the purpose and motivation behind Chinese food aid. As the president of the Lo Monthang Youth Club explained, “We may be poor, but that does not mean we need free food. We aren’t rich, but we aren’t hungry either.” Complicating this consideration, several elder members of Ghilling village felt that the food aid plans were Chinese ploys to generate dependency not just on foreign aid, but on Chinese goods in particular. “Look what happened in
Tibet – first they [China] built roads, then they brought food, and schools. And then they took it over. Look at what has been happening in Mustang. We are worried that China will do the same thing here.” Other community members complained that some of the food had expired by the time it was received. When I asked how they knew this to be true, they explained that previous experience with expired goods purchased at the tsongra put them on guard. Although only a few people admitted to being able to read Chinese characters on the packaging, the problem with expired products was referenced by nearly 50% of my survey informants in Mustang.

Building on these patterns of food aid, in November 2014 China and Nepal signed a new MOU committing 10 million RMB (US$ 1.63 million) annually from 2014-2018 for the development of Nepal’s northern districts. Signed by the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal and Nepal’s Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development, the MOU states that Chinese aid will be directed towards small-scale projects to “improve livelihoods in northern mountain regions” through developments in health, education, and road construction. 

Source: Photo by author (June 2015)
In Mustang, this pledge took its most recent shape as the 100 kW solar power station in Lo Monthang, completed in September 2015 (Pokharel 2015).

Marking the 60th year of bilateral relations and barely one month before the April 2015 earthquake, in March 2015 Beijing committed to a five-fold increase to its annual grant assistance to Nepal. A dramatic expansion from RMB 150 million annually, the pledge boosted Beijing’s annual grant assistance to Kathmandu to RMB 800 million (NRs 12.83 billion) (Sharma 2014). Speaking at the signing ceremony with the Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Nepali Finance Secretary Suman Prasad Sharma stated that the grant assistance would largely be directed towards the construction of mega-infrastructure. Referencing previous joint Sino-Nepali infrastructure projects such as the Arniko-Friendship Highway, the Kathmandu Ring Road, and Sunkoshi Hydropower, Sharma specified that the aid was to be directed towards the development of new dry ports, regional airports, additional hydropower facilities, and road improvements. For his part, Chinese Ambassador Wu Chuntai stated “the new platform of joint cooperation will help to further strengthen the ties between the two countries” (ekantipur 2015).

Opened by the November 2014 Nepal-China MOU and further prepared by China’s March 2015 commitment to increase grant packages, the Nepal earthquakes generated both new needs and fertile ground for greater Chinese aid to Nepal. Having established closer ties than any time in recent memory, the earthquakes broke open new emergency space that was expediently filled by Chinese humanitarian interventions. Such growth in the aid relationship between Beijing and Kathmandu also underscores how Nepali projects of bikas and concomitant processes of state making are (and expected to continue to be) underwritten by Chinese gifts of development.
In Mustang and more broadly across Nepal, the gift of development is exchanged across scales, from macro-level geopolitics to micro-level individual agencies, and with highly uneven outcomes across these registers. At the international level, Beijing’s financial and developmental gifts to Kathmandu take shape as new infrastructure projects across the district – such as Chinese contracts for improving the Beni-Jomsom-Lo Monthang Road and other OBOR development programs. These projects in turn foster specific Chinese interests in Nepal, such as access to mineral resources like uranium deposits recently confirmed in Mustang (Xinhuanet 2014b). At the national level, Chinese development projects – such as solar electricity installations in Lo Monthang – are promised as the long awaited interventions that will finally deliver light and modernity to the borderlands and present a model to be replicated across Nepal. And yet similar promises of bikas have been made (and left unfulfilled) for decades. Meanwhile, at the village level throughout Mustang, citizens continue to wait for the roads, tourists, school projects, food aid, and additional electricity projects that arrive in dependably unpredictable waves both from the north and the south. As eyes increasingly look toward China for material and financial support, reservations build about the political and social strings attached.

Significant tension exists between reservations about Chinese aid in Nepal’s trans-Himalayan borderland districts and within the elite chambers of power in Kathmandu. On the one hand, as the Lama of Ghattekhola in Rasuwa told me and many other people in Mustang echoed, “Chinese activities in Nepal make us nervous. We do not trust China. Look at what happened to Tibet. We are also Tibetan (or like Tibetan). What will happen to us?” To these residents of Nepal, the strings attached to Chinese aid are very much about social policies over identity, mobility, and containment that adversely and severely effect ethnically Tibetan populations. On the other hand, however, political leaders in Kathmandu are brazen about their
willingness to accept Chinese aid and investment, especially in the contexts of massive, new post-earthquake projects related to Beijing’s One Belt One Road Initiative. As Rabindra Adhikari, Chair of Nepal’s Parliamentary Committee on Development stated in July 2017, “China may have hidden interest behind OBOR but we shouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of this initiative for that reason alone” (Bhushal 2017). For many of Nepal’s powerful and elite, money talks, and is apparently worth whatever compromise. Unfortunately, the subjected targets of that compromise are often rural populations who have little say or decision in the matter.

Beyond China’s broader role as a new, global actor on the humanitarian stage (BBC 2015), Beijing’s interests in Nepal converge at the intersection of infrastructure and security. Looking specifically at what Beijing prioritizes through financial assistance to Kathmandu, my analysis shows that China’s activity in Nepal comprises three key dimensions: the development of energy resources and access to hydropower infrastructure; the expansion of transport corridors for increased export and trade to Nepal and India; and close observation of and control over Tibetan exile communities across Nepal. Considering that the Tibet-Mustang road increasingly serves as a key vector for Chinese engagement in Nepal, and because Mustang is a culturally Tibetan region with several Tibetan exile communities, recent Chinese activities in Mustang also pose provocative questions about the complex politics of Chinese aid, Tibetan ethnic identity, and trans-border mobility across the trans-Himalaya.

5.4 Ethnic-Identity Geopolitics and Chinese Extra-Territoriality in Nepal

Chinese interventions in Nepal, particularly those primarily (or ostensibly) geared towards infrastructure development, have become closely tied to Chinese concerns with state security and control over Tibetan exile populations. Since 2008, the Nepali government has
placed increasingly strict limitations on Tibetan communities within its territory. This turn is largely a result of Chinese pressure on the Government of Nepal following widespread protests against the Chinese Communist Party that erupted across the Tibetan Plateau in Spring 2008, and which continue to ignite protests of self-immolation in Tibetan communities both within China and in exile (McGranahan and Litzinger 2012). Ultimately for Beijing, the Tibetan presence in Nepal poses not only separatist threats to China’s state security but remains a thorn in the side of Sino-Indian relations as well.

Today, Nepali police restrictions constitute political and bodily containments over Tibetans’ mobilities, or the rights for socio-cultural expression as well as economic opportunity. These restrictions include prohibitions on Tibetan public assemblies for spiritual and community celebrations in urban spaces throughout Nepal as well as widespread detention of Tibetan refugees under dubious criminal accusations (Human Rights Watch 2014). In Boudhanath, the central Tibetan enclave of Kathmandu, many Tibetans expressed concerns over perceived (and likely real) Chinese spies increasingly present in the neighborhood, a feeling of surveillance compounded by closed circuit video cameras recently installed on street corners and above alleyways to monitor public gathering places. As a middle-aged Tibetan refugee explained to me as we walked kora (circumambulations) around the central Boudha stupa (chorten), “We left Tibet to escape the Chinese. And now what do we find here in Nepal? It feels almost the same.” As these panoptical conditions begin to resemble the disciplinary circumstances in Chinese Tibet (as well as the Kora La Mustang-Tibet border) from which thousands of Tibetans have fled over the past five decades, new experiences with the growing Chinese presence in Nepal have caused many Tibetan exiles to reference Boudha as starting to feel alarmingly similar to the surveilled spaces of Lhasa.
Couched in terms of mutual respect for sovereignty and increased cooperation and connectivity, the Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and Nepal released in Spring 2016 draws a direct link between Chinese investment, infrastructure development, and the management of Tibetan populations in Nepal (Report 2016). Signed on an official state visit between Prime Minister Oli and Premier Li Keqiang in Beijing on March 23, 2016, Articles 3-9 make these connections explicit, stating Nepal’s respect for Beijing’s One China Policy and ideology of national unity while Beijing outlines its commitment to infrastructure development and energy security in Nepal, particularly in border areas such as Mustang and Rasuwa. Signed during a time of extreme tension between Kathmandu and Delhi that escalated and deteriorated following the Fall 2015 fuel blockade and ethnic conflict in southern Nepal, the Joint Statement was signed just months before Kathmandu canceled a state visit to Delhi by President Bidhya Devi Bhandari and recalled the Nepali Ambassador to India (ekantipur 2016). While tensions between Delhi and Kathmandu have cooled since early 2016, the Joint Statement signaled Nepal’s frustration in its political relationship with India and reflected earnest efforts to forge closer ties with Beijing to counter balance Kathmandu’s historical dependencies on Delhi.

Key agreements contained within the articles comprising the Joint Statement include:

3. The two sides reiterated their firm commitment to respect each other’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, respect and accommodate each other’s concerns and core interests. The Nepalese side reiterated its commitment to One China Policy. It firmly supports the efforts made by the Chinese side to uphold state sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity, and does not allow any forces to use Nepalese territory for any anti-China or separatist activities. The Chinese side firmly supports and respects Nepal's own choice of social system and development path, and the efforts made by Nepalese side in upholding its sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, national unity and stability.

5. As regards Nepal-China bilateral cooperation, both sides agreed to synergize each other’s development planning, formulate appropriate bilateral cooperation programs and to carry out major projects under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Both sides agreed to strengthen connectivity, further step up the land and air links and improve the land transport infrastructure... Both sides exchanged views on facilitating Chinese investment in key areas including infrastructures by encouraging the Chinese investment in Nepal, as per the laws and regulation of Nepal. Both sides agreed to explore establishing cross border economic

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6 Bold italics emphasis is mine.
cooperation zones via existing frontier ports and to speed up opening up other frontier ports and trade points as mutually agreed upon...

6. The Chinese Government will continue to provide assistance to Nepal’s socio-economic development within its ability. The Chinese side will implement the 3 billion RMB grant assistance from 2016 to 2018 to support the post disaster reconstruction of Nepal, to carry out 25 key projects in areas covering infrastructure construction, recovery of people’s livelihood in quake-stricken areas of northern Nepal, repair of cultural and historic sites, capacity building in disaster prevention and control as well as medical and public health cooperation...The Chinese side will further enhance cooperation to the Nepalese side for the infrastructure development as well as social and economic development of the people residing in the bordering districts of Nepal and China.

8. Both sides agreed to conclude a commercial deal on the supply of petroleum products from China to Nepal...The Chinese side agreed to build oil storage facilities for Nepal, and will send experts to Nepal to carry out feasibility study on oil and gas resources research. The two sides agreed to establish a Dialogue Mechanism on Energy Cooperation to facilitate the long term planning of cooperation in this area, including trans-border power grid, hydro-power and solar power, etc. The Nepalese side agreed to take necessary steps to facilitate Chinese enterprises and their investment in Nepal.

9. The two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation between the law enforcement agencies of the two countries through exchange of information, capacity building and training in this field. Both sides agreed to negotiate Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters and Treaty on Extradition, in order to strengthen cooperation on the administration of border areas and fight against illegal border crossing and transnational crimes. (Report 2016)

In view of growing Chinese surveillance over and suspicion of Tibetans in Nepal, the new terms expressed in the Joint Statement raise significant questions as to what might come of the “firm commitment to respect each other’s independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, respect and accommodate each other’s concerns and core interests,” especially according to forthcoming negotiations on the Treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters and Treaty on Extradition. While Articles 5, 6, and 8 speak to ongoing collaborations on infrastructure development, trans-border connectivity, and energy security, Articles 3 and 9 address Kathmandu’s growing service to Beijing with respect to control over Tibetan populations, including but not limited to border crossing and extradition agreements.

A powerful representation of what I have previously called “a handshake across the Himalayas” (Murton, Lord, and Beazley 2016), the Joint Statement codifies and advances coordinated commitments between Nepal and China that are particularly sensitive not only in
Kathmandu but also in places like Mustang. Especially in borderland landscapes with natural resource endowments that are also home to Tibetan refugee communities and spaces of international mobility and exchange, the increasingly prominent role of China in Nepal is rewriting geopolitical and social relationships across multiple scales. Particularly with respect to the 2014 Sino-Nepal MOU and the 2015 commitment to a five-fold increase in aid – including large contributions made specifically for infrastructure development – Chinese projects demonstrate a concentration of humanitarian aid, foreign investment, and other infrastructural interventions in Mustang towards the expansion of broader regional economic and political connectivity.

Figure 5.9 A handshake across the Himalaya: Bikas and the gift of Chinese development in Nepal

Source: Global Times (Twitter 2016)

The way in which China is viewed in Nepal is rapidly changing. In Nepal and more broadly across South Asia, China has been historically depicted as a fire-breathing dragon – an intimidating but powerful force best left at a far remove. More recently, however, caricatures of China in the Nepali media have transformed the unpredictable dragon into a friendly giant panda. This shift in representational iconography, as illustrated in Global Times cartoon above – and
both reproduced in *The Kathmandu Post* and widely recirculated via Twitter – further reflects the ways in which Beijing has been welcomed and embraced by Kathmandu. Moreover, as Nepal’s tensions remain high with India, the proverbial elephant has been pushed to the sidelines in favor of a new, wealthier, and more internationally ambitious neighbor to the north (BBC 2015).

Another example of the handshake across the Himalayas, Nepal’s embrace of China is also conditional and precarious because the gift of development is not made freely. As Yeh writes in the context of Tibet but also highly relevant elsewhere (2013), the gift of development is both present and poison. Chinese aid to Nepal will continue to provide a basis for national advancements of *bikas* and state making for Kathmandu in exchange for extra-territorial power for Beijing over Tibetan populations abroad as well as access rights for energy security developments. Moreover, as China’s One Belt One Road Initiative expands exponentially, it remains critical to watch how ethnicity influences geopolitics in Mustang as well as more widely across Nepal and South Asia.

While the entry of Chinese investment and infrastructural development generates social transformation across many Nepali landscapes, the pace and size of Chinese interventions to Mustang and Nepal’s other borderland districts continues to increase (Sharma 2014). Ultimately, this investment-development trend provides a key view into the ways in which Chinese-sponsored infrastructure development articulates with processes of Nepali state formation and spatial reorganization, as borderland regions long relegated to the margins have indeed become central to transnational security interests. But in a country with the second lowest GDP in Asia and increasing economic inequality between urban and rural spaces, it remains uncertain that this development dynamic will in fact improve the lives of Nepal’s borderland or city citizenry.
For Tibetans, actions of resistance remain muted in Nepal, as the community’s agency has been significantly reduced under structural mechanisms of Nepali-Chinese control. Public assembly is forbidden for Tibetans, even for religious occasions or the celebration of the Dalai Lama’s birthday. Nepali police are conspicuously present (and imposingly threatening) in Boudha and throughout Tibetan refugee camps and exile communities during Tibetan Buddhist holidays, to say nothing of political moments such as the annual March 10 anniversary of Tibetan Uprising Day. While Tibetans continue to complain about Chinese interference in Nepal, and especially in the Boudha neighborhood, there exists a strong sense of reservation (but not necessarily submission) that there is little that can be done in the current climate. Tibetan refugees and other exiles are not official state citizens of Nepal, and particularly under the new agreements on extradition, political action risks jeopardizing the very life and residential status for many Tibetans in Nepal. Therefore, much of the Tibetan community continues with everyday life, frustrated by the vacuum of political engagement and opportunity, but willing to grant Dharamsala (in Indian territory) its place as the focal point for Tibetan resistance and action.

Furthermore in the context of Nepal’s ongoing political instability and need for durable reconstruction, Kathmandu appears increasingly willing to trade cash gifts with Beijing in exchange for concessions on its sovereign power. By accommodating Beijing’s particular anxieties over Tibetan exile populations and enforcing Chinese demands to silence and contain Tibetan voices and exile mobilities, Nepal presents a key space for the operations of extraterritorial Chinese power in Asia (Hudson 1998). Moreover, as Chinese aid to Nepal escalates annually, and Tibetans’ rights decrease in turn, Nepal will remain a key site to observe how shared practices of infrastructure development, and humanitarian assistance, and international
investment generate extra-territorial power that shapes both state formation and the lived experiences of state subjects between borderland spaces and urban centers.

5.5 Conclusion

A situated analysis of the ways in which power operates both spatially and materially through the intersecting vectors of humanitarian aid and infrastructure development, this chapter looked to post-earthquake Nepal and experiences with China in both Mustang and Kathmandu to understand the connections between disaster management, state formation, and extraterritorial power. Importantly, these insights are made in the context of regional geopolitics, government failure, and international infrastructure development in trans-Himalayan and Tibetan spaces of Nepal. Despite a protracted paralysis of post-earthquake reconstruction co-generated by ongoing fuel crises and government incompetence, a case study on Mustang opens new perspectives into the operations and challenges of the international aid community in Nepal. And particularly in the face of the Government of Nepal’s failure to effectively address the needs of the country, it is essential to reexamine ways in which humanitarian aid and international interventions – especially those from China – not only reconstruct and rebuild Nepal, but how they also shape state bureaucracies, social relations, and geopolitical configurations across uneven landscapes of disaster recovery.

The production of trans-Himalayan connectivity occurs at variegated levels, rewriting geopolitical alliances, advancing national dreams of bikas as the modernization of the state and its citizens, and affecting the movement of individual bodies in space. Particularly in Mustang as a frontier of infrastructure development and geopolitical theater, Chinese interventions facilitate local development, expand regional trade, undergird international connectivity, and enable
greater state security for both Kathmandu and Beijing. And more broadly in places like Rasuwa, the delivery of aid, the reconstruction of roads, and the restoration of international commerce and trade programs under Chinese development become dividends in cash for local citizens, contracts for Chinese firms, legitimacy for Kathmandu’s political establishment, and diplomatic leverage for Beijing in Nepal. Jumping places between the border and the capital, these productions are also translated into new business enterprises in the Nepali borderlands for urban entrepreneurs alongside new terms of engagement between Nepalese and Chinese political elites and common citizens alike, all while repositioning Tibetan exiles as re-marginalized subjects in between.

As geopolitical dynamics are rewritten across the region, support from Beijing takes shape as inflated cash gifts to Kathmandu with particular strings attached. Rather than fulfilling aspirations for becoming bikasit, I argue that a more immediate return paid on Chinese aid and investment to Nepal is not only soft power and strategic positioning for Beijing in South Asia – as directly expressed through the recent China-Nepal Joint Statement – but also future development programs predicated on energy and resource extraction. For example, Mustang is now recognized as a potential site for uranium extraction (Bhattarai 2016) as well as the target for new road expansions and the development of dry port trade facilities (Giri 2017; Tripathi 2016). Although Mustang does not yet present comparable hydropower or extractive mineral endowments as Rasuwa, development projects in Mustang do reflect a similar scaling up of trans-Himalayan infrastructure development that advance international trade and energy security between China and Nepal. Looking ahead, and especially in the ambitious and aspirational context of China’s One Belt One Road Initiative and recent establishment of the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank, the handshake across the Himalayas feels like a larger and
longer-term double bind that grips China and Nepal ever closer together through a convergence of infrastructure development, resource extraction, energy politics, and extra-territorial power.

Although China wields near overwhelming bargaining power, Nepal indeed maintains agency in the process of accepting Chinese interventions. It is therefore important to see how a small state like Nepal can and in fact does use China to support its own state-making agenda, instead of just the other way around. But for a country that also symbolizes the many failures of international development, and as political stability, energy security, infrastructural connectivity, and post-disaster economic momentum are still desperately needed in Nepal, it is difficult for Kathmandu to decline the gift of development from Beijing. While it is unlikely that Chinese investment will materialize the popularly imagined developmental future for a majority of Nepal’s population, this chapter instead suggests that Chinese interventions be seen as a reflection rather than a cure for Nepal’s economic and political woes. Moreover, in light of recent Indo-Nepali antagonisms and amidst China’s larger OBOR imaginaries, Nepal will remain a key site to watch in order to understand broader geopolitical dynamics of development, investment, and security across the trans-Himalaya between Kathmandu, Beijing, and Delhi.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

This dissertation argues that infrastructures transform material practices and social relations with distinct implications for state making, geopolitical security, and borderland identity. By examining the ways in which infrastructures develop in scalar and fractal ways, I reveal processes by which the state takes shape in borderland spaces far from the national center and how populations see, experience, and negotiate the state across newly territorialized spaces. The previous chapters analyze the entangled infrastructural development of highways and fences between Nepal and China and examine how bureaucracies and aid packages are shaped by and inspire the introduction of new infrastructural interventions. Together, I conceptualize the configuration of these processes in the production of a border corridor. Using a dialectical framework of mobility (thesis) and containment (antithesis), I interrogate how infrastructures are material resolutions (synthesis) that enable the movement of people and things but that also place both institutional and social limits on capacities for moving around. In so doing, I illustrate the ways in which infrastructure development undergirds state formation, is deployed as a geopolitical tool, advances the penetration of capitalist relations, and reshapes social relations between rural populations as well as a state and its citizens.

I conceptualize border corridors as infrastructural systems that facilitate new forms of mobility across geopolitical landscapes but that also reinforce social and economic constraints on the populations through which they operate. By moving capital between distant places, border corridors also enable new spatial fixes. However, corridors are passages that run to and from distinct places but that do not necessarily stop at the spaces in between. Thus, rather than
facilitating equal access to new resources, border corridors instead advance global capitalist relations characterized by wealth polarization, social marginalization, and uneven development. Arguing against classic development assumptions still popular in Nepal that suggest roads generate economic prosperity and resource distributions that bring benefits to everyone (even if not equally), I instead show that infrastructure development in Nepal sometimes does just the opposite by reinforcing already existing social hierarchies. Rather than flattening socio-economic landscapes, new roads and the economic relations they mediate instead deepen ruts of social exclusion as well as produce space for the Nepali state to take shape.

New road developments between Mustang and Tibet, as elsewhere across the Nepal-China borderlands, are envisioned and promoted as new avenues for the expansion of international trade and social development. However, on the basis of everyday experiences in Mustang and other districts of Nepal’s northern borderlands, it is evident that new road infrastructures do not benefit everyone equally. Asymmetrically privileging those who already posses substantial social and economic capital, new border corridors moreover advance Nepali state formation through projects that enroll historically peripheral populations in new institutional relationships with the state center. Generating new physical mobilities as well as bureaucratic containments for highland communities, road developments and concomitant infrastructural projects in Mustang at once transform regional geographical imaginaries, reinscribe historical social relations, accelerate international capital circulations, support the territorialization of the Nepali state, and translate international Chinese investment and development aid into practices of extra-territorial power.
Key Contributions

This dissertation makes a key geographic contribution to new literature on infrastructure by analyzing infrastructure development as both a material and social process that happens in scalar and fractal ways. By bringing infrastructure studies back to the ground, I show how very material things like roads and fences have both physical and discursive powers that rewrite relationships between the state and its citizens as well as between states. Chinese development programs in Nepal routinely prioritize the physical construction of transportation, hydropower, and shipment facilities. The materiality of these infrastructures advances Nepali claims of development and modernity – articulated as bikas – while they also generate soft power that Beijing leverages in Kathmandu. As such, infrastructures are revealed as both a promise and a gift, an imaginary and a reality, by which a state takes shape, territorializes its space, and repositions itself with respect to both its citizens and its neighbors. By unpacking infrastructural interventions and examining the ways in which various projects connect, augment, expand upon, and replace one another, infrastructures can seen as a fundamental driver of state formation, a process of geopolitical theater, a mediator of social relations, and a compass for reorienting geographic imaginaries. Because infrastructures also always generate and rewrite terms of both mobility and containment, they are also material resolutions of broader dialectical tensions for moving across land and organizing space into terrain.

In addition to providing new analytical and conceptual tools for the study of infrastructure development, this dissertation contributes to conversations in cultural geography, political geography, and development geography. By focusing on the uneven social and political processes of road development, I complicate the social emphasis of mobilities studies with material experiences from the borderlands. I do this by showing the ways in which roads and
borders are co-produced and how the production of new mobilities inherently also bring about new social restrictions and experiences with containment for subjects of development. Conversely, I also bring mobilities to bear on the social and material frameworks of border studies to argue that the processes, practices, and performances of bordering are both shaped by and in turn shape the very mobilities that are historically and socio-culturally constitutive for borderland relations. An ethnographically informed border biography provides a key intervention to these conversations between borders, mobility, and development. In the trans-Himalaya, borders are themselves a type of resource and a machine, like roads, that enable new mobilities for some as well as establish particular terms of containment for others. By utilizing both ethnographic stories and historical records to write a new border biography between Nepal and China, I also contribute a new understanding of how identities are shaped and internalized with and across borders rather than against the border and in service to the state (Sahlins 1989).

This dissertation also considers roads as tools of diplomacy to advance understandings of Nepal’s history of state making as well as the country’s complicated experiences with colonialism. On the one hand, roads were limited and restricted in 19th century Nepal by the Rana regime in order to avoid British colonialism and maintain a certain kind of isolationist state security. Today, on the other hand, roads and international connectivity are instead a central priority of national development, and one that is advanced under certain conditions of Chinese financial and political support. Bearing this paradox in mind, road making is not just fundamental to state making in Nepal; it is also a key and contested ground of Nepal’s wider experiences with international relations and colonial encounter. As such, this study shows how road diplomacy and associated infrastructural developments reflect shifting processes and regimes of territorialization in Nepal, across the trans-Himalaya, and more widely between China
and India. Particularly under the influence of new OBOR interventions radiating out from Beijing, this insight also complicates considerations about the place of Nepal in a non-postcolonial (Des Chene 2008) but perhaps neo-imperial Asian context.

Methodologically, this project advances mobilities from theoretical analytic to fieldwork approach. Traveling roads and crossing borders across the trans-Himalaya by a variety of transport modes, I utilized participatory mobility as a peripatetic qualitative approach to gain closer insights to the uneven, disruptive experiences with life on and off the roads in the Nepal and Tibet borderlands. Taking cues from others who have argued for processual engagements with “infrastructure as method” (Björkman 2015), I combined grounded and multi-sited ethnography with ambulatory practices to understand how the transformation of historical pathways into rural roads affects local livelihoods, social relations, consumer practices, and subject positions between citizens and both sovereign and extra-territorial states. In so doing, I further contribute a material and experiential aspect to ongoing turns in mobilities studies.

Towards an ethnography of geopolitics that illustrates how ethnic identity and cultural practice influence international investment and development interventions between Nepal and China, this study also provides key empirical findings that cross scale from villages of the trans-Himalaya to international relations throughout Asia. By examining the ways in which the forces of globalization, modernity, and capitalism affect geographical imaginations and community relations in borderland spaces, I draw insights with which to understand similar and parallel development dynamics increasingly common across Asia. That is, how might local experiences with road making and fence construction in Mustang relate to similar (or different) experiences with new transport infrastructures and border regimes in the borderlands of Myanmar and Pakistan? In light of increasingly major Chinese infrastructural interventions across Asia under
the OBOR Initiative and mega-projects like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (Khattak 2016), knowledge about the local impacts of international development efforts is essential for responsible planning and informed resistance both for and against future development projects. Challenging top-down and state-centric analyses common in political science and international relations as well as policy circles, I instead take a grounded approach that highlights how uneven and disruptive transformations to borderland life define everyday engagements with development in historically rural but increasingly inter-connected trans-Himalayan places. In so doing, I localize geopolitics in order to complicate wider policy-oriented conversations about rapidly accelerating infrastructure development across Asia today.

Nepal, China, and OBOR

Development, bordering, and state making are iterative processes characterized by mobility and containment. While my analysis looks specifically to a remote borderland of the trans-Himalaya, the social and political dynamics generated by Nepal-China infrastructure developments are not altogether unique and therefore have critical relevance for broader, global interpretations of 21st century international development. As China embarks on the world’s largest international infrastructure development program through the One Belt One Road Initiative, it is essential to have new conceptual, analytical, and theoretical tools to critically examine the multi-scalar implications of the widespread creation of new border corridors.

As China’s OBOR agenda expands infrastructure outward across Asia, it is necessary to analyze not just where these development projects go, but to understand the ways in which new infrastructures affect the communities through which pass. I suggest that it is productive to bring my border corridor conceptualization to bear on studies of OBOR in order to see the grounded
and everyday ways that local borderland populations and socio-cultural and political-economic landscapes are impacted by major infrastructure projects. Challenging macro-level analyses of OBOR that shape most conventional understandings of China’s development interventions, I instead propose a micro-level and more granular approach to examine how these OBOR projects impact constituents outside of participating state centers. That is, I call for closer attention to the places where new OBOR infrastructures pass through and not just the terminals to where they go.

Towards this objective, this dissertation complicates understandings of China’s role in defining, institutionalizing, and building the state in Nepal in order to open space for broader understandings of international development across Asian and other global borderlands. Asking what, beyond scale, is different or new about Chinese development, critical analysis on the materiality of Chinese development in Nepal contributes knowledge on the role of China in the humanitarian sector as well as a fresh perspective on Chinese development abroad, especially beyond more established contexts of Africa and South America. As Nepal’s largest foreign donor, China itself is neither colonized nor a colonizer in the Western Imperial model (although China has indeed been recognized as a neocolonial power with respect to recent histories in Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Manchuria). In light of these conditions, Chinese investment and development abroad – particularly the extension of the Going West campaign (xibu da kaifa) into the Going Out strategy and One Belt One Road Initiative (Sidaway and Woon 2017) – requires new considerations of internationalism in the context of new, non-Western development models.

A close examination of Chinese interventions in Nepal helps to push thinking on South-South development while also challenging conventional area studies frameworks that situate East Asia and South Asia as distinct realms. As China repositions itself as a global leader in development, foreign direct investment, and humanitarian assistance, classic models that assume
and counterpoise international development as a distinctly North-South relationship are increasingly inadequate for productive and critical analysis. Looking forward, empirically grounded and theoretically rigorous interpretations of the ways in which Chinese interventionism shapes development in Asia, Africa, and beyond will be indispensable for geopolitical and socio-cultural understandings of international development in the 21st century.

Finally, China’s OBOR projects increasingly connect distant Asian countries in new material, social, political, and economic ways. As China reaches across its borders in the development of roads, railways, dry-ports, pipelines, hydropower facilities, telecommunication systems, and social outreach initiatives, infrastructure can also be utilized as an analytical device to disrupt classical regional studies thinking that places East Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia as separate spaces rather than interconnected entities. New infrastructure thinking, I argue, can therefore be mobilized to shed light on connectivity and push against and beyond historically limited frameworks of regional containers. At the junction of mobilities and borders, geographically rigorous infrastructure studies thus opens new space for reimagining and reinterpreting international relations and geopolitics in the context of material and social connections rather than separations.

**Strong Borders, New Infrastructures**

While Chinese infrastructural projects increasingly transcend borders, many infrastructure developments elsewhere in the world are moving forward precisely to fortify borders and contain mobilities. This is particularly true in the current political moment in North America and Europe, as new border walls and regimes of security in the United States and European Union are made to contain the very mobilities generated by what has recently been
conceived as the borderless world itself. Material formations reflecting global nationalist and populist anxieties, these infrastructures are a physical response to the social disruptions generated by global trends in de-bordering, characterized by free trade, economic migration, international travel, refugee movements, and global conflict. The 2016 US Presidential Election placed great focus on the US-Mexico border wall, Brexit was inspired by UK separatism from rather than integration with the European Union, and the unprecedented scale of the global refugee crisis is leading to the construction of physical and social walls across Eastern Europe performed as new national barricades. In light of these alarming trends, critical studies at the intersection of borders, mobilities, and infrastructures remain essential to understanding contemporary socio-political systems in western contexts.

Beyond border walls, infrastructure development is also central to conversations about national improvement and state making in the United States. However, the current US President’s infrastructural visions conform to a privatized, capitalist model rather than one advanced by public works in the interest of greater social goods. For example, private contactor construction of the imagined US-Mexico border wall, policy reversal on the corporate Keystone pipeline, and fetishized visions of opulent new airports suggest significantly different priorities, interests, and impacts of infrastructure development under the present White House. Rather than investment for improving the national railway system or other public works projects like those that built America’s interstate highway system in the mid-20th century, the current Administration’s infrastructural imaginary might be better considered one that prioritizes wealth consolidation and capital accumulation above broad social services and national connectivity.

And while private infrastructure projects move forward, the walls continue to go up between America and its neighbors. Structures, policies, and discourses alike, these walls are
expressed and performed, for example, through exclusionary, racist, and xenophobic visa policies, retractions from international free trade agreements, and withdrawals from important commitments to climate change and foreign aid. Whereas America’s international relations have long been characterized by connections enabled by infrastructures of mobility, the new priorities appear increasingly committed to infrastructure as a production of borders in the interests of retrograde separatism and privatized isolationism. While it remains to be seen in what ways new infrastructure developments will take shape as border corridors across America, they will no doubt continue to set new dialectical terms of both mobility and containment for populations domestic and abroad.

**Looking Forward**

Moving from the United States back to the trans-Himalaya, I maintain that mobilities, borders, and the infrastructures that mediate them provide a productive entry-point for understanding the ways in which cultural practices, social relations, state formations, and geopolitical interests intersect and shape one another. Although the Mustang-Tibet borderlands are a relatively small and easily overlooked place, they are nevertheless a key intersection of Asian geopolitics and provide an open window for seeing the state. From roads and fences to tax bureaucracies and humanitarian aid packages, a view to infrastructure development in Mustang shows how the state takes shape and territorializes its space while social relations are reconfigured for local and international populations alike. Jumping socio-spatial scales, an examination of what is happening today in a trans-Himalaya borderland also sheds new light on broader development trajectories – such as the production of border corridors as modes of
mobility and containment – and how roads are deployed as tools of diplomacy not just between Nepal and China but also in wider Asian and international contexts.

Infrastructure matters, and studying roads and borders produces localized but transferrable knowledge about the ways in which space is territorialized in response to capital flows as well as how everyday practices of consumption and bordering connect to processes of social stratification, uneven development, and state making. Because Chinese investment and development operates far beyond Nepal, Beijing’s interventions from Laos and Burma to Mongolia and Kazakhstan will likely produce ongoing socio-cultural disruptions and political economic transformations across the Eurasian continent. More broadly still, infrastructure development in the classical physical form of walls, roads, and pipelines as well as newer mechanisms of surveillance and virtual networks has become a driving discourse of national improvement and state security across the globe, from Nepal to the United States and countless places in between. By looking at roads and borders between Nepal and China, this study opens a view far beyond the trans-Himalayan borderlands and provides a new lens with which to see and understand how infrastructure development mediates wider geopolitics and reconfigures state-society relations in the 21st century.
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