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Review of 'Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions' by Tina Harris

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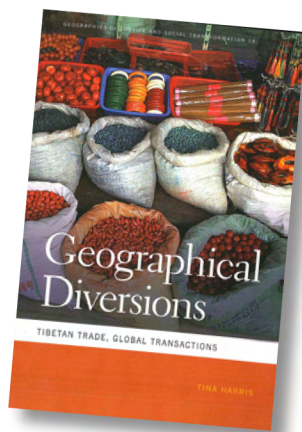
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Geographical Diversions: Tibetan Trade, Global Transactions

Tina Harris. Athens, GA: Georgia University Press, 2013. 189 pages. ISBN 978-08-203-4512-3.

Reviewed by Galen Murton

In *Geographical Diversions*, Tina Harris provides a critical analysis of recent social and economic transformations taking place along historical trade routes between Lhasa, Kalimpong, Gangtok, and Kathmandu. At the crossroads of cultural anthropology and human geography, Harris uses material things such as maps, yak tails, and Tibetan aprons to examine regional traders' place-based experiences with larger global processes of international commerce and geopolitics. Bringing local narratives of mobility and fixity to bear on more abstract theories of globalization, her study also explores the various disruptive processes that produce geographies and histories of trade. Taking "diversions" as a point of departure, Harris focuses on an operational shift between two specific trade routes to "discover why such geographical diversions are formed, who created them, and for what particular interests, and to show by contrast how the route is in fact 'lived in and through'" (p. 20).

On the basis of rich and multi-sited ethnographic research with Trans-Himalayan traders in several major marketplaces in India, Nepal, and Tibet, Harris reveals to her reader how routes and relations are established

through the practices of "everyday life" (Henri Lefebvre. 2003. *The Urban Revolution*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press). Candid and colorful narratives drawn from Tibetan, Newari, Lepcha, and Marwari merchants situate the study across multiple ethnicities, generations, borders, and towns. This diversity of perspective and experience defines a spatial and temporal "mobility" that Harris deliberately contrasts to the social, economic, and political processes of "fixing" by which trade routes are opened, made, and contested.

In order to disrupt more abstract and macro-level discourse around globalization and international trade, Harris intentionally brings her scale of analysis down to the "level of the object" (p. 6). In so doing, Harris focuses her description on the experiences of traders themselves, the middlemen and "mediators" of local, regional, and global economic flows. Harris specifically uses these narratives to show how traders jump scale, as decisions to carry particular products are routinely conditioned by knowledge of global trends. Harris demonstrates the salience of this transnational knowledge by showing how fashion preferences amongst Tibetan women in New York City and Lhasa often dictate if traders in Kalimpong choose to carry bolts of woolen or synthetic silk fabrics. Moreover, Harris's subjects illustrate the localized politics behind regional trade relations, as narratives about what goods to carry and routes to follow reveal strongly divergent opinions about the opportunities and

costs created with re-opening (or not opening) specific trade routes.

Joining a rich but limited body of literature examining Trans-Himalayan trade communities (James Fisher. 1987. *Trans-Himalayan Traders*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass; Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf. 1988. *Himalayan Traders*. Delhi: Time Books International; Janet Rizvi. 2004. *Trans-Himalayan Caravans*. New York: Oxford University Press; Wim van Spengen. 2000. *Tibetan Border Worlds*. London: Routledge; Sara Shneiderman. 2013. "Himalayan Border Citizens: Sovereignty and Mobility in the Nepal-Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) of China Border Zone." *Political Geography* 35: 25-36), *Geographical Diversions* contributes a strong geographical perspective to scholarship largely situated within the field of anthropology. Linking local experiences to global processes, Harris's use of scale updates more historical ethnographic work conducted with Himalayan trade communities in highland Nepal and the Tibetan Plateau (Fisher 1987; Fürer-Haimendorf 1988; Rizvi 2004). Moreover, by embracing trading "places" and the concomitant processes by which routes are "made," Harris locates her study squarely within Himalayan spaces, a marked contrast to other ethnographic studies that emphasize the overseas experiences of Himalayan traders (van Spengen 2000). Operating across the Tibet-Nepal-India border-world, Harris also advances existing knowledge on markets and mobilities across this highly politicized space

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(Shneiderman 2013). Moreover, the study contributes a valuable case study to ongoing debates around the ‘place’ of Zomia and ‘borderless’ communities across the Himalaya and Tibetan Plateau (James C. Scott. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Willem van Schendel. 2002. “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20(6) 647–668; Jean Michaud. 2010. “Editorial – Zomia and Beyond.” *Journal of Global History* 5(02): 187–214; Sara Shneiderman. 2010. “Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia? Some Scholarly and Political Considerations Across Time and Space.” *Journal of Global History* 5(02): 289–312).

While Harris pays close attention to the spatial dimension of regional trade patterns, the study would be strengthened by a deeper engagement with the temporal context of Trans-Himalayan geopolitics in the mid-2000s. That is, brief mention is made of the critical time at which the Nathu-la trade route between Gangtok and Gyantse was recently opened – July 6, 2006 (p. 89). Not only was this pass re-opened during the summer of 2006, as Harris identifies, but it was inaugurated the *very same week* as the maiden voyage of the new Tibet-Qinghai railway from Beijing to Lhasa. While international diplomacy between Delhi and Beijing was clearly not the focus of Harris’s study, a more extensive assessment could be made

of the key time at which the gate was lifted on this historical route. In light of the unique economic and political factors that facilitated the re-opening of the Nathu-la, and considering the tremendous change that the railroad has brought to Tibet, a sharper temporal analysis of regional conditions during the ‘India-China Friendship Year’ could have further advanced Harris’s study on traders’ disruptive experiences with transnational market dynamics.

In the tradition of Owen Lattimore’s borderland studies on Inner Asia, *Geographical Diversions* advances scholarship on a part of the world too often rendered ‘a blank on the map.’ Arguing for the relevance of highland trade communities, Harris shows that Trans-Himalayan traders and the routes they follow are precisely at the intersection of major economic, political, and social transformations sweeping across Asia. By looking closely at a specific transnational arrangement of goods, merchants, and markets, Harris’s rich Himalayan case study reveals how differential access to roads, commodities, and consumers generates an “unevenness of development” (Neil Smith. 2008. *Uneven Development*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.) experienced widely throughout the world. In the end, Harris succeeds at “demonstrating why the use of ethnography is integral to understanding large-scale shifts in capital in a region that is still relatively unrepresented in macro histories” (p. 104). And, in so doing, Harris joins Lattimore and fellow

scholars of High Asia to show that Trans-Himalayan borderlands are not marginal but, rather, truly at the center of experience with global socio-economic change.

Galen Murton is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Geography at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His current research examines the geopolitical and socio-economic dimensions of Chinese road development in the Tibet-Nepal borderlands.