

**Tibetan Carpets...Or Are They? An Analysis of the Carpet  
Industry in Kathmandu, Nepal**

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## *Dedication*

To my family both in India and the US, but especially my parents, Ranganathan and Anandhi Ramaswamy, who have both encouraged and given me the opportunity to explore the world.

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There are many people without whom I could not do this project. Thank you to Flavors for their endless internet, grilled cheeses, and ice cream; to Phuntsok La for being the liar he is; to Tinley Lama and Anand Lama for introducing me to the world of carpet factories; especially Anand, who has shared with me many secrets of the trade without which I would have been lost; also, to all of the workers who opened their hearts and shared their stories; to Dholma, for teaching me to weave, and her family for taking me into their home; to Thupten La and Sanjiv ji for their translations; to my fellow SIT students who calmed me down during my moments of panic; and finally, to my advisor Christina Monson for not only giving me my first lesson in analyzing carpets, but also for sharing in and encouraging my own carpet fetish.

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***List of Acronyms***

SATA.....	Swiss Aid for Technical Assistance
SDC.....	Swiss Development Company
JHC.....	Jawalakhel Handicraft Center
HMG.....	His Majesty's Government
CTA.....	Central Tibetan Administration
TCV.....	Tibetan Children's Village
ANTUF.....	All Nepal Trade Union Federation
NTUC-I.....	Nepal Trade Union Congress-Independent
NC.....	National Congress
GEFONT.....	General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions

## *Abstract*

This project focuses on the Tibetan Carpet Industry started in Nepal during the 1960s with help of the Central Tibetan Administration, His Majesty's Government of Nepal, and support from the Swiss. By the 1990s, the Industry was central to Nepal's economy, providing means of employment for many Nepalese, and no longer needed external support. Since the 1990s, however, Tibetan Carpets are struggling to compete on the international market. My objective is to analyze Tibetan Carpets as they exist in Nepal's capitalist market. Using Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, I explore the dynamics between capitalist producer, proletariat worker, and consumer in three factories: Jawalakhel Handicraft Center, Tinley Carpet Factory, and Trina Carpet Factory. Each one is an archetype of the industry, one being a public factory, one being private Tibetan-owned, and the last being private Nepali-owned. Having explored these three, I found that Marx's theories fit all three to varying degrees, though private more than public, but the framework alone is insufficient without also analyzing Nepal's current social and political situations.

## *Introduction*

For centuries, Tibetan custom dictated that a mother weave a carpet upon the birth of a baby girl. This carpet, and the knowledge of its weaving, was a birthright; the girl's first possession and skill developed at the tender age of 10. According to tradition, a girl's marriage may signify the end of direct kinship ties to her own family, but the carpet woven at her birth, and the practice behind its creation, was and would be passed down to her and her future lineage.<sup>1</sup> Even today, in every Tibetan home, one would find a plethora of carpets adorning the beds and floors. Unlike many Tibetan goods, however, their value lies outside the realm of Buddhism; carpets seem to play the simple role of keeping the people of the "Roof of the World" warm, and connecting mother with daughter. As such, carpet making would remain a household activity, equivalent to apron weaving or subsistence farming, until after the 1959 Diaspora.

Upon the flight of His Holiness, the XIV Dalai Lama, thousands of Tibetans fled in his wake, from Tibet to the neighboring countries India and Nepal. Nepal, now having the burden of trying to take care of many of these refugees, was fortunate in enlisting the help of Swiss Aid and Technical Assistance (SATA), now known as the Swiss Development Organization (SDC). Tibetan culture had previously relied heavily on land and space both for monastic farms and the nomadic herders of Eastern Tibet. Nepal was ill-equipped to

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<sup>1</sup> Anand Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 11, 2009.

provide the lifestyle to which these refugees were accustomed. Thus, a new importance was placed on those that were considered previously to be domestic duties, particularly in the development of carpets and handicrafts.<sup>2</sup>

In 1960, SATA and His Majesty's Government (HMG) started Jawalakhel Handicraft Center (JHC) at the Tibetan Settlement of the same name. It was during this time that HMG began to open Nepal to tourism, and as such the popularity of Tibetan carpets exploded. By the 1990s, the Industry was not only unsupported by external sources, but also central to Nepal's economy by making up to 80 percent of Nepal's GDP, and providing means of employment for many Nepali in the private sector.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the end of the 90s marked a devastating two hit punch for the carpet industry as the market became oversaturated, and child labor tainted carpets in the eyes of Western consumers.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the decline of Tibetan Carpets sales, they are still the fifth largest economy of Nepal.<sup>5</sup> Thus, understanding the current state of a once popular industry may provide the background for future growth in Nepal's economy. As such, this project will study the contemporary status of Tibetan Carpet factories as they function in Nepal today. I focus specifically on three groups: the consumer, the Carpet Factory owners, and the people that weave, as framed within the Marxist dynamics of a capitalist system. This study is important in discussing the impact of a labor-intensive industry on the interactions between not only different

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<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 23, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> O'Neill, Tom. "Ethnic Identity and Instrumentality in Tibeto-Nepalese Carpet Production." *Asian Studies Review*, 2005: 275-286.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 23, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Nepal Department of Industry, Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation Division, *Industrial Statistics 2007/2008*, by Tilak Ram Sharma (Tripureswore, Kathmandu, Nepal, 2008), <http://www.doind.gov.np>.



ethnic groups in society, but also class divisions, social status, and political divides, particularly as it relates to the economic development of Nepal.

### ***Carpet Making: A Process***

Carpets were once defined by those that produced them. Now with the inclusion of Nepali workers, several people now call them Tibeto-Nepali Carpets or Tibetan-style Carpets. For the purposes of this paper, a Tibetan carpet is not defined by who makes it, but rather one made in the traditional, hand-knotted, wool-woven style.<sup>6</sup> Despite the controversies regarding its “Tibetanness,” the process by which these carpets are made is standard. It all starts with the fundamental building block of the Tibetan carpet: wool. Traditionally, carpets use Tibetan wool; famous for its density, over time carpets made of Tibetan wool develops a shine called the *patina*<sup>7</sup>. However, Tibetan wool is also the most expensive so many factories have started mixing their wool with the less expensive and lower quality, New Zealand wool. Some factories in India and some poorer ones in Nepal have even started importing lower quality wool from Rajasthan, India to compete at all in the carpet market.<sup>8</sup>

Private Carpet Factories prefer buying wool and then outsourcing the labor to contracted spinning factories. However, this is only cost efficient when ordering in bulk.<sup>9</sup> Thus, these factories have started to buy handspun yarn. Jawalakhel is an exception, having spinners on site to make the yarn, but even it

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<sup>6</sup> Chodrak, Trinley and Kesang Tashi. *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2000, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Anand Lama, interview by author, Besi Gau, Nepal, April 15, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Anand Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 22, 2009.

must outsource some of its labor, unable to spin all the yarn it needs.<sup>10</sup> During the purchase of the wool, owners of carpet factories are also working in conjunction with carpet designers, graph makers, and the consumer in order to create an attractive product. Colors and patterns are picked so that after purchasing the wool, factories can immediately start the dyeing process.<sup>11</sup>

Again, they differ based on their needs, but most factories also contract this part of the carpet making process. There are two types of dyes, local vegetable dyes and imported, Swiss chemical dyes, the former of which is more expensive. For smaller orders, or if the buyer specifically requests it, carpet factories will move in the direction of “pot dyeing” or dyeing that is done by hand. Dyeing in this fashion produces a better color. For larger orders, factories use machine dyeing, but such orders must be over 20 kg. per machine in order for it to be cost-effective; rarely seen in today’s market.<sup>12</sup> During the 1990s, the government mandated that all dyeing plants be moved outside the valley so that they would not contaminate the water supply. However, such measures have since been lifted as the number of dyeing plants grows fewer and fewer.<sup>13</sup>

Just after these beginning stages is the real heart, and my focus, of the whole process: weaving. Whereas some factories do their own dyeing, and others, spinning, weaving is the only consistent job available across the board. The standard loom stretches the cotton warp<sup>14</sup> from floor to ceiling. A standard 3 by 6

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<sup>10</sup> Diki, interview by author, Jawalakhel, Nepal, April 9, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 19, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Warps in Tibet used to be made of wool, but its brittle nature combined with its weight has forced the advent of cotton. Anand Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 11, 2009.

*kha den*, the traditional Tibetan size, takes an experienced weaver about one month give or take based on the complexity of the design.<sup>15</sup> One weaver can cover a width of up to two feet by stretching and moving from side to side on the bench. Thus, larger carpets require multiple workers.<sup>16</sup> Weavers are also responsible for hammering any loose knots after the carpet is done.

After the carpet is completed, it is sent to be trimmed, washed, and then, if necessary, packed. In order to get texture in the pattern of the carpet, trimmers cut the carpet by hand. For the 3 by 6 carpet it takes an experienced cutter about four or five hours to trim a carpet, contingent on design, as usual. With the exception of large carpets, trimmers will work individually. After being trimmed, the carpet must be washed. There are four options for washing carpets; in order of least to greatest cost they are: regular, strong, antique, and eco-friendly.<sup>17</sup> There is no difference between regular and strong except for the perception of the customer. Antique, as the name suggests, is to age carpets to match the growing trend of Western buyers to want “old” carpets. Eco-friendly is a relatively new category. While several washing plants<sup>18</sup> claim to have this wash, most of my research indicates very little or no difference at all in the chemicals used for an eco-friendly wash.<sup>19</sup> The washing process itself takes one to two weeks depending on the size of the carpet, after which it is either sent directly to the buyer or to the store to become a *stock rug*.

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<sup>15</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009

<sup>18</sup> Because of the chemicals used, washing plants are required to recycle water and have their own water source, though this is not necessarily followed. Anand Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 11, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Anand Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 19, 2009.

Carpets are also ranked based on their quality. Quality is determined by knots per square inch. There are three standard carpets that are generally sold: 100, 80, and 60. 100 knot carpets are by far the most popular, but also the most expensive. Carpets can be made beyond 100, but labor costs start to increase at an exponential rate.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Methodology***

Since the mid-90s, the Carpet Industry in Nepal has been virtually ignored by academia. A few have mentioned carpet factories, but do not go further in depth. Primary written sources came from two places, first a book called Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs, which explicated the details of a “good” carpet, and second, the work of Tom O’Neil who wrote related articles during the late nineties. Due to this dearth of other scholarly information, my project relied heavily on interviews and participant observation. All of my research was completed in Kathmandu valley, with the exception of a few village factory excursions close by because the carpet factories that developed in Pokhara and Chialsa have already been shut down.<sup>21</sup> Right now the Valley represents the hub of capital and industry. A few years ago, carpet factories would have lined the streets of many areas of Kathmandu; however, due to outside pressures to be discussed, factories are now centered in Boudha, where my interviews took place.

While I did gain a deeper understanding of the whole process, inconsistency between tasks that are done in house versus those outsourced rendered comparisons between dyeing and carpet design impossible. I focus on

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<sup>20</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 23, 2009.

weaving because it is done in all types of factories. Since its original establishment three types of factories have developed, the public factory in Jawalakhel, factories owned by Tibetans, and those owned by Nepali. Each of these three caters to different customers, have different relations to their workers, and different incentives for going into the carpet business. In order to understand these differences, one factory of each type was used as a case study, and explored further. Jawalakhel Handicraft Center (JHC) represented the original public-good factory, Tinley Carpet Factory is owned by Tibetans, and Trina Carpets is owned and operated by a Nepali. During the course of my research, I found the comparisons and contrasts between factories to be both dramatic and informative to the nature of the carpet industry, especially in understanding factory life.

My research is framed using Karl Marx's theory of *commodity fetishism*. In his work, *Das Kapital*, Marx details the nature of a capitalist, industrializing society. The theory discusses the process through which items become commodified goods, how the workers' relationship then shifts in relationship to the goods, and finally culminates in a shift of a good's value at a societal level, the last point being the definition of *commodity fetishism*. The theory asserts that the value of a good in a capitalist society is not defined by the amount of labor put into a product, but the price it fetches in the marketplace; this socially defined value being labeled as a fetish. The implication is that the relationship between capitalists (or bourgeoisie) and workers (or the proletariat) exists only in commodified production.<sup>22</sup> His work is particularly apt in describing the carpet

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<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Process of Production of Capital, Vol. I* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), ch. 1.

industry of Nepal. By nature the carpet factory is divided into three ranked groups: consumers, capitalist producers, and the proletariat workers. My research focuses on these three groups and their particular relationship with carpets.

However, despite the appearance of Marx's theory being applicable, the carpet industry of Nepal is distinctive in a couple of ways that influence the studied interactions. For instance, the industry in Nepal was done so *artificially* order to create a space for Tibetan Refugees' cultural and economic survival. Additionally, Nepal's current precarious economic and political situations have created the interplay of both forces in a way unique to itself. Such circumstances that lie outside the realm of Marxist theory help to develop a more accurate and nuanced depiction of the practicalities of this once-successful industry, and thus are important to understand regardless of how they fit into a singular framework. As my research shows, the contemporary carpet industry fits Karl Marx's theory of *commodity fetishism*, but the way in which the theory is experienced in each of the three factories is complicated by Nepal's political and social situation.

As a final note, because of the sensitive nature of questions asked, some the workers wish to remain anonymous. For the reader's clarity, when only first names are mentioned, it is because the source wished that I omit the second; completely made up names are marked with an asterisk.

### ***Those Who Own the Means of Production***

In the years following Jawalakhel Handicraft Center's formative stage, the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) gave the JHC funding and managerial recommendations. Since then, the relationships between JHC and its original

founders have changed, cutting out relations with HMG, and giving a more indirect role to SATA and the CTA. JHC is now run by a Board of Directors comprised of five members: the General Manager, appointed by the CTA, a member of the SDC, and three community organizers, who were workers elected from within the Refugee Settlement.<sup>23</sup> Board Members are responsible for JHC's budget, workers' salaries, and complaints. Within the factory, labor is divided into three subcategories: weaving, spinning, and sales. Each section has a manager or master who acts as a liaison between management and workers. While there is some interaction between the different groups, mostly through family ties, workers generally stick to one section.<sup>24</sup> Working for management requires an appointment independent of direct carpet-related experience.

Tenzin Diki, Secretary to the General Manager, started working in Jawalakhel two years ago. She was educated in Dharamsala, India through the TCV school system. Upon graduation, she joined the Central Tibetan Administration, and worked for a couple of years before getting transferred to Nepal. When the relationship between the CTA and JHC started to decrease, she was invited by JHC's board to work in her current position. When asked *why* she was particularly interested in this job, she emphasized the community nature of the factory. "Since volunteering for the CTA, I have been interested in charity work. The Handicraft Center was a good way to maintain Tibetan Heritage."<sup>25</sup> She is still careful to admit that the pay for her work would be about the same or

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<sup>23</sup> Diki, interview by author, Jawalakhel, Kathmandu, May 2, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Choedren Tsing, interview by author, Jawalakhel, Kathmandu, April 15, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Diki, May 2, 2009.

more so if she worked elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, she has been involved for longer than the majority of management in the carpet factory. The General Manager, Tsering Dolma, for instance, had only been working there for about a year. Her predecessor, too, only lasted about six months. The last person to keep his job for any significant amount of time was Tsering Dhondhup who was in charge during the late nineties and left in order to run Tinley Carpet Factory, a private company.<sup>27</sup>

Tinley Carpet Factory started as a contract company in the late eighties by Tsering Norbu. The development of this factory parallels the development of the industry itself. Carpet making first resembled the Putting Out System that characterized early British textiles. Looms and yarn were provided to individual weavers at their homes, the company would then send the carpets over to Jawalakhel's storeroom. Because of their prior knowledge of the industry, Tibetans started moving toward private factories to match the carpet's popular demand. Companies started to consolidate their looms, and two tiers of carpet factories emerged. The first tier mega-houses had not only their own spinners, dyeing masters, graph makers, weavers, and washers, but also had private, custom orders and their own store rooms from which to sell stock rugs. The second tier, to which Tinley Carpets belonged, relied on larger export companies that would contract out carpet orders to factories; export companies were responsible for finding buyers in other countries, at this time that usually meant Europe, and included not only carpets, but also handicrafts and pashminas. The collapse of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.



carpet industry, however, meant the virtual extinction of the latter type. Tinley Carpets changed about five years ago and, under the guidance of Tsering Dhondhup, the carpet factory now takes its own orders and has a storeroom.<sup>28</sup>

Tsering Dhondhup's story is quite similar to Diki's own. His parents fled Tibet in 1987-88 to Dharamsala; like Diki, he too went through the Tibetan schooling system, and joined the CTA's Department of Finance. After gaining experience in Dharamsala selling handicrafts, he became export manager in 1991. By 92, he moved to Nepal and became export manager of carpets as department head. During the beginning stages of privatization, he maintained his post as General Manager and was in charge of the entire Refugee Settlement. After about five years, he quit saying that "running a private factory is much simpler than having to deal with the problems of Tibetans," because in the camp, he was responsible for social complaints also. At Tinley Carpets, he has a good relationship with the Masters and Manager, the latter of whom is Tibetan. He visits the factory around once a week, and claims to have a "good relationship" with his workers. When asked about his particular attachment to the carpet industry though, he responded that he had none. He estimates the carpet market to around 30 percent of where it was 10 years ago, and so, if the market demanded it, he could "just as easily move into selling handicrafts and pashminas."<sup>29</sup>

Trina Carpets started as a Tier 1 carpet store that markets high end, luxury carpets. With a buyer base in Chicago, they take mostly custom orders from the West, taking advantage of the major carpet boom with massive German orders for

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<sup>28</sup> Tinley Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 10, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.

60 knot carpets. Having personal connections to the Tibetan community, and an awareness of Nepali business trends, Rita Lama started Trina Carpets with virtually nothing.<sup>30</sup> At the time, Nepalese, and particularly Tamang, were weavers, not owners.<sup>31</sup> Nowadays, they work towards only marketing 100 knot carpets. Here, dyeing and weaving are done in house, but the factory has developed close ties to its washing plant and constitutes about eighty percent of the plant's business. Thus, despite its larger size (around 80 weavers), the company is streamlined, with the main positions of authority held within the family—Rita takes care of business in the USA, while her brother, Anand Lama, works within Nepal.<sup>32</sup>

Anand Lama, like his sister is Tamang, though his family has connections outside the valley, he was born in Kathmandu. Fortunately, unlike many other Tamang, Anand was given the opportunity to go to the then, the only university in Kathmandu, and continued to pursue his MBA. In his words:

Cast in Nepal is still a big problem. There are no government opportunities for my caste. I am Tamang, so we have to be businessmen...in the private sector. When people talk and say, how come they can afford cars, it is because we work in the private sector, and we are not afraid of hard work. When government people work from 9 or 10 to 5 o' clock sharp...I start my day at 5

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<sup>30</sup> Christina Monson, Interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, May 9, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> O'Neill, Tom. "Ethnic Identity and Instrumentality in Tibeto-Nepalese Carpet Production." *Asian Studies Review*, 2005: 275.

<sup>32</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

or 6 to talk to international clients, and work all day...most days past 5. This is why we do well.<sup>33</sup>

He started working in the industry because his sister offered him the job, but it has become his passion, and has a genuine love for business. His favorite part, he says, is the people he meets, and the places he travels. Of course, whether or not he would pursue another industry with the same vigor is untested; but he, like many of his manufacturing counterparts in the valley, is a firm believer in the capitalist system, particularly because his family has become and remained successful despite their own experiences with prejudice for their ethnicity.

Karl Marx dictates that those who own the means of production are guilty of two things. First, they feel a sense of ownership and responsibility over the labor that went into the good's production even though they are not the physical producers. Second, the bourgeois necessarily add to the fetishism of commodified goods by adding their own emphasis on the monetary value of the product. In sum, the combination of both locks this bourgeois class into their socially defined role as those who create the capitalist system.<sup>34</sup> While this is true, to an extent, of all three factories and their management; there are additional concerns.

Diki's description of her role within the factory is indicative of Jawalakhel's capitalist, or lack thereof, stance. Managerial incentive within the factory starts with the desire to work for the preservation of a Tibetan community-in-exile. In fact, few of the management have experience directly with carpets, whether through manufacturing or design. Of the fifteen or so workers, only one

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<sup>33</sup> Anand Lama, April 15, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Marx, chapter 1.

worked as an accountant at an export company dealing with private factories before beginning his work at Jawalakhel. The others earned their positions via other work they had done for the Tibetan community or the CTA in the past. In fact, the management's skill set would probably be insufficient in developing a private factory. So it would seem that the public nature of this factory would preclude the management from feeling ownership over labor. Instead, for Diki and her counterparts, it is an ownership over culture; the carpet is merely the physical manifestation of an intangible good. The Board of Directors includes workers from the factory resulting in the community base of the factory and makes ownership by the management virtually impossible. But the fact that JHC must still compete in the free market means that *something* must be commodified.

Private factories fit Marxist theories better. When talking about the workers, products, even Tinley Carpets itself, Tsering Dhondhup always referred to them possessively. "I tell *my* workers to work for themselves," "*My* carpets are always Tibetan wool," "*My* factory had faced few labor problems," et cetera. Occasionally, he would use "our," referring to the family owned aspect of its operation.<sup>35</sup> In contrast, Tinley Lama, technically a co-owner of the factory and Tsering Dhondhup's brother in law always used third person, separating himself from the factory.<sup>36</sup> Both, however, seemed to not care about the details of the factory's inner workings, or their relationships to workers beyond worker production. The emphasis, lay on the end product—Tibetan, hand-made carpets, and their value in the market. Should the market drop further, he may diversify his

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<sup>35</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Tinley Lama, April 10, 2009.

assets. Tsering Dhondhup fully admitted he was in the private sector because it was far more efficient and easier to handle than the public servant role he had before. Despite his Tibetan heritage, the rugs produced as his factory are made solely for profit. The Tibetan story and incentive is fairly straightforward. They have taken advantage of an industry originally created for and by them.

Trina Carpets had to be more creative in the way it asserted itself in the industry. Unlike the previous two, Rita Lama had no prior experience, nor a cultural heritage upon which to rely. This political dynamic significantly impacts the relationship her brother has with the industry and the factory. Because he feels the industry is so dominated by Nepali, by the end of our time together, he made a point of referring to carpets as Tibetan *Style* carpets rather than Tibetan carpets. Though this may appear as a semantic difference, it is indicative of the larger ownership he feels over the industry and the production of carpets. Additionally, the factory relies on outside, custom orders. In this sense, it is the very definition of adding value to products, and turning these products into commodities. On the other hand, his desire to become involved in the capitalist sector and his reason for maintaining the system stem from his lack of opportunity.

Nepal, until 1990, was officially a Hindu kingdom, dominated by the very rigid caste system that placed some groups, like Brahmins and Chhetris, higher on the social totem pole, than tribal groups like Anand's ethnicity, the Tamang. Even now, despite the rhetoric of the Communist Party of Nepal - Maoists who claim to be ridding Nepal of caste discrimination, if groups like the Tamang are to

succeed, they must do so in the private sector. Capitalism and the reproduction of the capitalist system therefore face an additional problem.

Politics in Nepal play an umbrella role that is pervasive in all three factories though to varying degrees. For Jawalakhel, it means that the center must pay taxes to a government who provides few, if any, amenities to the Tibetans living within the settlement. It also means that the property upon which JHC remains cannot be owned by Tibetans, but instead is still partially owned by the SDC and the Nepali Red Cross Society.<sup>37</sup> Such distinctions do little to influence the functioning of the Handicraft Center, but do create a concrete delineation between Tibetans living in the settlement versus those who do not. However, these are problems faced simply by being in exile; JHC has less to worry regarding the very tumultuous political situation than private factories. When the Maoists were rising to power, their corresponding union, the ANTUF, would routinely harass companies into paying “UT” or “under table” taxes. For some of the larger factories, the ANTUF would demand up to 1 lakh NRs. a month. These factories had two choices, either shut down entirely, or significantly cut back on the number of people working within the factory.<sup>38</sup>

For Tinley Carpets, a factory who had hired several hundred workers before the crash, the Maoist crackdown was another reason to cut back on workers. The carpet factory is now small enough that it flies under the radar of most Maoist activities; rarely does the factory pay any bribery. Since two years ago, the only problems Tsering Dhondhup has really faced have been regarding

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<sup>37</sup> Diki, April 9, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> Anand Lama, interview by author, Besi Gau, Nepal, May 1, 2009.

rent; buildings as prices have risen dramatically within the valley.<sup>39</sup> It is, more complicated, once again, for Trina Carpets. In fact, not all Maoist actions have terrible results; two years ago, Trina Carpets also started a factory in Kirtipur, a nearby village, because operating within the valley was an extravagant cost. Continued harassment from the Maoists also resulted in Trina Carpets move six months ago from Sita Pylae to Boudha in an effort to escape the disregard for private property rights. Problems have since decreased, but not gone away. Anand and Rita are seriously considering moving their factory out of Nepal, a fairly typical story. Politics in Nepal may cause problems of capital flight as factories leave for the friendlier environments in India and China.<sup>40</sup> Harassment generally takes a monetary form, but many unions use workers as pawns in their political games, placing an additional stress on an already delicate industry.

### ***Those Who Produce***

Perhaps the starkest contrast between the factories comes down to the differences between the workers in each of the factories. It also this point of contention that draws critics to the term “Tibetan carpets,” because fundamentally, the majority of workers are *not* Tibetan. Dyeing and washing plants are often run by Indians and Nepali make up the majority of weavers.<sup>41</sup> In today’s market, with many Tibetans cashing out of the failing market to move out “West,” the ratio of Tibetan to Nepali owners is becoming more even.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Anand Lama, April 15, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Anand Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 22, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Tinley Lama, April 10, 2009

Jawalakhel Handicraft Center is one of the last, if not the last, actual Tibetan factory. But even within the production of the carpet, only weaving and some spinning are done by Tibetans. In terms of demographics, most weavers, around 95%, are women. Men, particularly the younger generations, work in managerial positions, or outside the Camp. Workers are paid per meter according to the quality of carpet they produce; for a 100 knot carpet, they get paid 2954 NRs., for an 80 knot carpet, they get 1936 NRs., and for a 60 knot carpet they get paid 1144 NRs.<sup>43</sup> Generally, they start from 8 and work until 6, getting breaks for lunch and tea. They also get Sunday and Mondays off, and are paid every two weeks.<sup>44</sup> In terms of hierarchy among workers, there are two masters, but still no real means of promotion within the factory; masters are often hired outside of the factory. The only real involvement workers have with the management are via their three community leaders who are elected for a one year term during which they have a paid leave of absence from the factory. In addition, workers have access to a day care center, a school through grade 5, free housing, electricity, and water, and a Gensokang when they get older. After reaching the age of 65, workers can retire and receive a pension.<sup>45</sup> Though many do not make really make much, they pay the optional “taxes” to the CTA (at around 75 NRs. annually).

Kelsang Diki, age 34, was born in Nepal. She has been working at the factory for approximately 16 years. Her entire family had been working at JHC as

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<sup>43</sup> Diki, May 4, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Diki, April 9, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Diki, May 4, 2009.



part of the original flood of refugees that came in 1959, settled in Jawalakhel, and trained by the Swiss; her mother was a weaver, and her father, a spinner. After her parents could no longer afford school, weaving became her only option for work. Regardless for how long she works, her salary will be static. During her marriage, she did not have to work as hard, but now, after her divorce, she is left with the responsibility of raising two children (a girl, age 4, and a boy, age 15) with little to no outside help. Fortunately, her boy has a sponsor and can afford to go to Namgyal High School, a fairly expensive option. She says, “I hope my children can get good educations and one day go to America, and so I will not have to work as hard.” Though weaving is a family tradition, in her eyes, she chooses this profession because of money. She makes carpets because she knows how, but this is certainly not the profession she would choose for herself, or her children.<sup>46</sup>

Dolma has been working at the carpet factory for approximately 19 years. She fled Tibet in 1985 with her husband in the hopes of getting an education and receiving the blessings of His Holiness. Unfortunately, her husband’s premature death demanded that she find a job, and was fortunate enough to find one in Jawalakhel. In Tibet, her family farmed, and really she had no experience with weaving; she received training during which she was provided with food and housing, but no money. She says now, “The money is not great, but it is okay, and we get a pension when we reach...60 or 65. I am alone here, right now, but [still the people of JHC] are my family, it is hard work, but we can survive by working and living together.” In fact, Dolma hopes to move to America where both her

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<sup>46</sup> Kelsang Diki, interview by author, Jawalakhel, Nepal, April 15, 2009.

daughters currently reside, one of whom is in school with the help of a private sponsor, but admits that she remains at JHC “out of habit.”<sup>47</sup>

Private companies have a different relationship with their workers. Tinley Carpets pay for their workers housing, electricity, water, and cleaning. If necessary, they also provide a per meter stipend for children’s education. Like Jawalakhel, they also pay per meter depending on quality. For a 100 knot carpet, they get 1600 to 2200 NRs., 1200 to 1400 NRs. for 80 knots, and 850 NRs. for 60 knots; the worker also gets paid every two weeks after working about 9 to 10 hours a day, 6 days a week with Saturdays as vacation. There is some variation in the amount workers get paid because wages are also contingent on design and materials used. Extras costs are added to the price of the carpet. There is also a gender discrepancy with workers being about 90% female and 10% male. Such stark differences were also apparent in the hierarchy of the factory. The highest position besides owner, the manager, is Tibetan though the two masters below him were Nepali.<sup>48</sup> The majority of Tinley Carpet weavers, particularly those with seniority, are, in fact, Sherpa; though really the factory is a poster child for ethnic diversity, as there were many Tamang, Madeshi, and Magar among the weavers. Despite their ethnic diversity, the preferred language of communication was definitely Nepali, often with some local dialect mixed in.

Pema and Maya are Sherpa who moved from the village in the hopes of giving their children a better life, and an education. While in the village, they had

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<sup>47</sup> Dolma, interview by author, Jawalakhel, Nepal, April 5, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.

three children, one elder boy and two girls. When their youngest daughter was just a baby, they moved into the city, thirteen years ago. Pema had learned to weave while in the village. It was a skill taught amongst his family. Upon reaching the carpet factory, he taught his wife who weaved briefly at the beginning. After saving for a couple of years, and with the help of his son, Norsang, who was deemed to be already too old to start school, Pema could afford to send Dholma and her younger sister to school, albeit a few years late for first grade. Today, they stay in the same factory which hired them from the village, but Pema and Maya no longer really work in the factory. They have also added to their family another son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter. Their housing and minimum weaving is done by friends or their son. Their income is supplemented by Pema's job as a labor contractor for companies in the gulf. All eight members of their family share one rather spacious room, though currently there are only seven because Norsang's wife is currently in Kuwait.<sup>49</sup> As Dholma once exclaimed emphatically, "Who really needs to work at this factory? They ask only what we want to give, you know?"<sup>50</sup>

Though her analysis does give away her youth, at 16<sup>51</sup>, Dholma virtually pays for her own education. Though she was born in a village about 4 hours away, her memories are of Kathmandu. As a child in the factory, she learned to weave from her mother when she was about 9. Nepali Law also dictates children 14 or older may work part-time in industries that are not physically dangerous, and does

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<sup>49</sup> Pema, interview by author, April 26, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Dholma, interview by author, April 26, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Children's Act of 1992 defines a "child" as anyone younger than 16.

not interfere with their education. For the past two years during holidays and sometimes after school, she works on stock rug carpets. The income she provides is meager, usually her rugs are no bigger than 50 cm by 50 cm, but this becoming her future is a distinct possibility.<sup>52</sup> When asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she responded only with a confused grin despite ranking 13<sup>th</sup> in her class of 60. Unlike her counterparts in the United States, she had not really given her future much thought. Two days later she told me, “A teacher. I would like to be a teacher, but you have to be in school for a long time. College<sup>53</sup> is much harder than school.”<sup>54</sup> Still, there is a chance she will not have to work with carpets. Many of the children who grew up in this factory no longer live there. As Tinley said, “Many kids, they see up close what factory life is like, so they try to get as far away as possible.”<sup>55</sup> In either case, Dholma’s choice, and the path of her choosing, will not be particularly surprising to the workers of the factory.

The situation at Tinley Carpets is a mild version of worker’s lives in Kathmandu. Talking to the workers of Trina Carpets shows how many problems can develop as the result of a fractured relationship between management (even at a more basic master level) and workers. Pay grade of Trina Carpet is virtually the same as Tinley’s. They are paid per meter, 2200 to 2600 NRs. for 100 knot carpets, 1600 to 1800 NRs. 80 knot carpets, and 750 to 800 NRs. for 60 knot carpets, once again contingent on design and materials used within the carpet.<sup>56</sup> In

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<sup>52</sup> Dholma, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 21, 2009.

<sup>53</sup> College in Kathmandu is actually grades 11-12 where students must choose their future track. Meena, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 22, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Dholma, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 28, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Tinley Lama, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 8, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Anand Lama, May 1, 2009.

addition, they, too, are given housing, electricity, and water.<sup>57</sup> They work from 4am to 8 pm, with breaks for breakfast and lunch, for 6 days a week with Saturdays as vacations.<sup>58</sup> They are paid every two weeks. However, Trina is perhaps the most different of the three factories in terms of demographics. The majority of workers come from the same village in Mid-Nepal. Those that do not come from that particular village at least come from the same province because workers rely on family connections in order to get their jobs. The factory is a little larger, and split pretty evenly between men and women. Nepali is, as usual, the language of choice. There are two masters, one of whom is a Maoist and from the same village as the workers; the other is stricter. Both are male.

Mina\* is a newcomer to the factory having only been here for two years. She chose it because many of her friends and family also work here. Originally, she says, she “wanted to see the city because so many people say that you can get jobs here.” So, despite the wishes of her parents, she ran away in the hopes of getting a job and making money in the city. Her sentiments were echoed across the room. Since coming to the city, life is much harder than she anticipated. The wages are just enough to make ends meet, but never enough to justify the hours that she puts in. “When we make a mistake,” she says, “we get beaten and yelled at.” She has often considered moving back home, as all the factory girls have, but there is nothing there. “Back in the village, there is nothing there. It is...boring.” There are no opportunities there, nor the opportunities she anticipated here. And even when she now visits home, she is antsy, having been used to keeping so

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<sup>57</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Mina, Interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 29, 2009.

busy. There are some conveniences like electricity, and just enough money to be a little wealthier than her village counterparts. But she maintains that even her friends at the factory are not enough to make the situation altogether bearable. As if on cue, the master, suspicious of our conversation, demanded I talk to someone else and yelled for her to pay attention to the loom.<sup>59</sup>

Not all stories are so doom and gloom. “Some girls take longer to adjust,” says Reena\*, a slightly older woman working on a different loom. Reena has been here for six years. She continues among the giggles of her loom mates, “There is room to work if you are hard-working.” Reena is married and has a three year old. Her husband also works at the factory, but between the two of them, they are still unable to afford tuition for UKG, the equivalent of pre-school. There are only about 6 or 7 children at the factory, the oldest is about six, none of whom appear to attend school. Reena, however, is adamant that her daughter will not weave. She intends to stay in Kathmandu so that her daughter may attend school and lead a better life than she. “I won’t teach her how to weave,” she insists. But in the background, her daughter playfully hammer away at the knotted bar on the loom. The women of the factory were reserved in their judgments and stories; concerned that the management would overhear, their criticisms were quietly delivered. In contrast, the men were far more forthcoming.<sup>60</sup>

Raj is the de facto leader of the Factory’s boys section. At 23, he was both charming and vocal about his life at the factory. He started 6 years ago, and left with the reluctant blessings of his family in the village. He is one of few who did

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Reena, Interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 29, 2009.

not actually come from the same village, but from the same province. While at the village, he attended about 1 to 2 years of schooling.

I can read and write a little, but I thought it was a waste of time.

My parents are also uneducated, and so school does not matter as much in my family. I was looking for a way to make more money, so I would not have to be a farmer. I could have also been a porter, but this was easier, so I chose this.

As he was telling his story, many boys swayed their heads in affirmation. His was a typical story. He did admit, however, that quitting school may have been a mistake. “It is very difficult for me to make money quickly because I have no money or education. Even to be a shop keeper, I would need money to start my business.” He recently got back from a trip to his village. There, his parents no longer have complaints. Raj laughs, “I leave them money; enough that they are happy.” All of his friends in the villages are now also asking for jobs in the factory. He recognizes that life is very difficult and unfair for the workers of the factory, but he recognizes that he is better off than many of his counterparts; so much so, that his younger brother works in the factory as well.<sup>61</sup>

Marx’s theory of *commodity fetish* argues that the more commodified the product, the more workers will be alienated from their product. This happens for two reasons. First, the bourgeois have already claimed ownership over the product. Second, the worker is so separated from the entire process of creating the product, that the only item over which the laborer still has control is his or her

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<sup>61</sup> Raj, Interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 29, 2009.

labor. The stories of the workers are indicative of their attitude towards their factory and the loyalty they feel towards their management; and thus, their relationship can be used as a signpost to understanding just how commodified both the labor and the product produced by the carpet industry actually are.<sup>62</sup>

While this could work in an ideal capitalist society, Nepal, once again, has additional factors that mitigate the process of commoditization. Unions have had a relatively long and involved history with the workers. The ANTUF is merely the latest of a string of political unions who have expressed a desire to become more involved. They may be harassing the bourgeois producers at the managerial level, but their involvement, or any union's for that matter, is overestimated. Of course, the majority of these influences occur within the private factory setting.

At Jawalakhel, because the camp is phrased as being a haven to Tibetans, to be opposed to the management is equivalent of rejecting one's Tibetan heritage and identity. JHC does also take special measures to ensure that their workers have no serious complaints. For instance, Kelsang Diki did not have access to education when she was young; this societal problem was redressed for the next generation through the advent of private sponsors. When asked how they found these sponsors, the workers claimed that JHC would match them with counterparts in the West.<sup>63</sup> Dolma and Kelsang also agreed that they prefer a government job over a private factory where they might be able to earn more money, or work longer hours, because they feel safer with the government.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Marx, ch. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Kelsang Diki, April 15, 2009.

<sup>64</sup> Kelsang Diki and Dolma, April 15, 2009.



They especially feel that their skills are not transferrable; their labor and culture is the only thing that they can potentially commodify. But their labor do they actually commodify; even within a factory structured like a government, workers feel little to no connection to their job. Both were insistent that they weave because they have to, and their children have or will have futures completely unrelated. Both have carpets in their home, but neither bought them from within the settlement. “These carpets,” Kelsang stated, “they are for the tourists; they are not for Tibetans...not the right pattern and too expensive.”<sup>65</sup> They respect the function of the factory, but find the tourists that come to gawk at their work as humorous; this is not what they consider to be Tibetan culture. Though relative to their Nepali counterparts, the Tibetan complaints are minor. “The government only provides for public hospital; for private hospitals, they only cover a portion of the bill.” Their complaints rarely revolve around money or blatant disrespect as they have enough to cover their needs and a voice higher up.

Marx’s theories are particularly poignant when understanding the situation in Nepal because the complaints of workers deal go beyond *just* the monetary. While a monetary system, Marx argues, removes one step from understanding the true value of a good, the fundamental problem is the *lack of value* placed on the workers in the factories. Workers view their salaries as tangible ways in which they may measure the worth of their labor.<sup>66</sup> Tibetans do not complain because they have a venue through which they address their concerns. Their voices matter

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<sup>65</sup> Kelsang Diki, May 15, 2009.

<sup>66</sup> Marx, Ch. 1.

to JHC, and they have no expectation of being fully accepted while in exile. This is perhaps the most crucial difference between Tinley and Trina Carpets.

At Tinley Carpets, the workers feel less pressure from the management. The masters were not only polite to their workers, but went above and beyond the call of duty to help them, often babysitting, or feeding the children, when their parents were too busy working. The easy rapport between master and worker created a calmer dynamic that meant even though the weavers technically made less money than either of the other two factories, they were happy, and had no intention or desire to leave. As Pema pointed out, “we are educating our children here; [Tsering], though we do not see him often, is kind, and so, here is where we will stay.”<sup>67</sup> Two years prior, the Maoists demanded that Tsering Dhondhup provide his workers two buses and bonuses for missed labor so that they may attend a rally in honor of Labor Day. Seeing no problem with this, he agreed; but when he presented the idea to the workers, only about half of them actually went to the rally. The rest were content to stay and work during Labor Day.<sup>68</sup> Just this past Democracy Day, while many factories in the area took the day off, Dholma and a couple of other workers were finishing their rugs. This is not to suggest that they do not have their problems. The money is still only just enough to make ends meet, and the rooms that they must share are small. The difference is that the respect between workers and management has lessened the tensions between the two naturally contentious groups.

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<sup>67</sup> Pema, April 26, 2009.

<sup>68</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.

The fundamental question, though, remains: why do these carpet workers not raise the issue of wages when they are quite clearly being paid less? For one, the *labor issue* has become significant in the political sphere, but only at a macro level. Unions like the National Trade Union Congress Independent (NTUC-I), associated with the National Congress (NC) Party, the main opposition group to the Maoists, have been involved with carpet factories for years, but put significantly less pressure on factories than groups like ANTUF. Krishna Shah, Central Secretary of the Nepal Carpet Workers Union, claims that he only visits one factory, once a week, so as to not disturb their work. Very rarely did unions actually stir workers. The most they did was compensate in areas factories did not address; that is, give basic adult education and subsidize some medical treatments.<sup>69</sup> These facilities are really the only thing requested by workers, but the concern of checking back the Maoists has now taken over the union's primary efforts (for further discussion of unions, see Appendix B). Now, some companies really feel union pressures. Associated with the Maoists, the ANTUF holds enough political power to rally some workers who still maintain roots in the villages.

However, the key is being on the Maoist radar. Tinley Carpets sees little, if any, interference from the Maoists. Pema and some others believe it to be for two reasons. First, because they are Sherpa, though technically Nepali, there are some definite Tibetan roots that Maoists tend to just gloss over. Perhaps the results would be different if the workers were more "typical Nepali," even the

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<sup>69</sup> Shah, Krishna, Interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, May 3, 3009.

NTUC-I said they deal with more Nepali-owned factories than Tibetan-owned ones despite the latter being more prevalent than the former. Second, the vast majority of workers have been there for at least 7 years; if they have not, their connections, the person through whom they got the job, has been working for a significant period of time. While these workers do visit their villages, generally they are visiting extended families.<sup>70</sup> These workers tend to be a little more settled in the valley than those found in Trina carpets whose workers still maintain relatively close ties to direct, nuclear family in the villages. Prior to Maoist interference, Trina Carpet still faced the difficult problem of navigating a dying market; laborers were certainly not the root of the problem.

For now, Trina Carpet struggles to maintain the cohesion of its workers. Both the poor market and the poor industrial climate have manifested some serious problems with the factory as a whole, not just its workers. Some weavers at Trina Carpets are successfully demanding and receiving 3000 NRs. a square meter; yet they are still unhappy, and the demands keep increasing in their complexity. On the surface level, money appears to be the biggest problem. However, when questioned, the workers had three very specific complaints that have less to do with money and more to do with the fundamental rights to which they feel entitled. Mina's biggest complaint, for instance, is that she is essentially forced to eat company meals, and those meals are then docked from wages. This in itself does not seem that bad, but her complaint is that they have no options.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Pema, April 26, 2009.

<sup>71</sup> Mina, April 29, 2009.

They must buy their raw food from the designated store, regardless of how reflective it is of market price.

Reena further added that the lack of education for her daughter seriously makes her reconsider the factory. “But to change jobs, so often, it does not look good. It takes time to earn another’s trust. And there is no guarantee that they will pay for [my daughter’s] education either. Instead, it might be better just to wait.” Trina Carpets generally tries to avoid hiring mothers, and is supposed to provide a 500 NRs. stipend so that the children may go to school, but it appears that a stipend has not manifested.<sup>72</sup> As if wholly aware of all of the factory’s problems, Raj independently laid out the previous two complaints and completed it with one other problem I heard that morning. “There is a girl in the other room right now. She has Typhoid, but has no money to pay for the doctors’ bill or medicine. People here get sick a lot, we are not sure if it is us or the water.”<sup>73</sup> When workers get sick, it causes a slew of problems. Not only can a carpet not be completed on time, as other workers must compensate for the sick weaver, but the sick weaver becomes indebted to the factory that foots the bill. Once again, his or her wages are docked. For fear of never saving enough money, some of these sick workers continue to work, like the girl with typhoid, only increasing the rate of sickness.

Pradeep, a relative of the girl with typhoid was visiting and said the fundamental problem was a lack of education, starting even with basic sanitation and boiling water. Interestingly, he espoused the idea that the government did not really care what happened to the workers. “Carpet workers make up the majority

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<sup>72</sup> Reena, April 29, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Raj, April 29, 2009.

of workers in Kathmandu. But really the government is only caring about themselves. Politicians very rarely listen to what workers have to say.”<sup>74</sup> Though he spoke quietly, a number of heads closer in the area nodded in agreement. Why then, did the workers approach the management, and continue to demand from the management, more money? If the ANTUF did not have complete control over the factory, who is to blame for the problems between management and workers? The problem is that factory workers are just as divided as any other group. They, too, are split by ethnicity, age, social circumstance, etc. At the moment the ANTUF just happens to be the union with the most clout, and wields the most fear. Many blame workers for bringing the Maoists into power; they say that it was the lack of education. Even if it were true that workers were responsible, lack of education is one of the biggest complaints workers have. They are essentially being blamed for a problem over which they literally have no control and are forced into. In addition, the pressure of having one Maoist leader only adds the workers feeling that they must agree with the Maoist cause, regardless of how they actually feel.

Of course, some of the workers do, mostly the boys, but even Raj was frank in saying, “I have heard the rumor that factories are closing down. This job is still the only one I can get, and I will not risk losing it.”<sup>75</sup> Falling into the line that Marxist theory presents, he still defines himself by his work. His problems and concerns are merely exacerbated a virtually uncontrollable political circumstance. As if to solidify this point, a number of workers had mentioned how the two days before the firing of the Field Marshal, a bus was sent to Trina

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<sup>74</sup> Pradeep, interview by author, Kathmandu, April 29, 2009.

<sup>75</sup> Raj, April 29, 2009.

carpets to pick up workers so that they may express their malcontent. In reality, many of the workers were disappointed in missing a day's work, and feel disillusioned with politics. Political parties and unions have been promising workers things for years, but they have yet to see those promises come to fruition.

### ***Those Who Consume***

Though the understanding why people buy carpet is not nearly as dramatic as worker-management relations in the factories, their role as consumers is absolutely essential in understanding the perpetuation of Capitalist markets. Remember, the fundamental definition of commodity fetish is the socially added value to an object. Carpets are particularly interesting to study because they have morphed in a number of ways due to consumer demand. Equally interesting is the reasoning behind why people are willing to buy carpets for the amount they do, and from where they choose to purchase them.

Carpets are sold in the same way in which workers are paid, by quality and by square meter. With quality, however, comes an additional dimension. There are two different kinds of wool generally used in Tibetan Carpets: Tibetan and New Zealand. Jawalakhel's 80 and 60 knot carpets both use up to 30 percent of the lesser quality New Zealand wool. Per square meter, a 100 knot carpet costs 220 USD; 80 and 60 knot carpets, despite their lesser quality, cost 145 and 100 USD respectively. Generally, they make mostly stock rugs, though some custom orders do pass through from time to time. Out of all showrooms, they are the only

ones who seemingly add silk in stock rugs which is unusual because silk simply costs so much more, and *need* to be bought.<sup>76</sup>

During my time observing the showroom, I found consumers to fit a certain category. In one instance, three westerners with hiking backpacks sat on the steps to the factory, Lonely Planet in hand open to the chapter on the Tibetan Refugee Camp. People are buying the experience of helping Tibetans than for the carpet themselves. Many walk through the lower half of the factory which is open from multiple sides so that tourists make enter. They snap pictures with their SLR camera before their guide ushers them upstairs to the showroom. Many of their questions relate to the Tibetan cause rather than carpets. I observed no one asking about 60 versus 100 knot carpets, nor did anyone seem to care about the quality of wool. Instead, they hammered the salesperson with questions like, “How much of this goes to the Tibetans here?” “Which ones are Traditional?” “Do all Tibetans have a carpet?” and “Where does the money from carpet sales go?”

Senior salesperson Trina Palmo had been working at the factory for about six months. Her parents were weavers and she grew up in the Jawalakhel community. When I first talked with her, she was very interested in telling JHC’s story and expanding on the Tibetan cause. In her opinion, the number one request of foreigners is that she tells the Tibetan story, particularly of those in exile.

People...they come and take pictures and then they come upstairs.

Mostly they come after reading about us in that book. Many times

they do not buy a carpet, but instead they donate to the Center. We

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<sup>76</sup> Trina Palmo, interview by author, Jawalakhel, Nepal, April 28, 2009.



get almost as many donations as people buying carpets. It's like a charity. People give money because they give to a charity; only people who don't buy carpets outside.

When asked if she had a carpet she responded, "Of course many. But I do not buy from here."<sup>77</sup> The costs are just too high, and the carpets are not made for people like her. She, like everyone else, understands the game, the commodification of culture.

So where do Tibetans actually buy their carpets? The answer would seemingly be in Boudha. Sky Lake Showroom, the store to Tinley Carpets is full of carpets out of which, only a few are bigger than the traditional 3 by 6, less than a 100 knots, of a modern design, or some combination of the three. Because of their consumer base, they have two different sets of prices, local and tourist. For a 100 knot carpet, local price is about 94 USD, 80 knots is 75 USD, and 60 knots is 60 USD. Tourist prices, in contrast, are 145, 90, 65-70<sup>78</sup> USD for the same 100, 80, and 60 knots, respectively.<sup>79</sup> To give an idea of the consumer demography, business was generally conducted in two languages: Tibetan and Nepali. Also, most, if not all the rugs are in all wool. For Tinley carpets, the only carpets that use abnormal materials are custom rugs.

And while they do make custom rugs, a large percentage of their profits depend on the locals who frequent the store to furnish their houses.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Range is due to design. Modern is more expensive than traditional. Tashi Dhondhup, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 17, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> Tsering Dhondhup, April 19, 2009.

In my observations, people who came into the store had either been there before, or were people who had been there before. “Your store has a good reputation...very famous,” they would say. Even the ones that were not Tibetan, like the Japanese lady looking for a small rug to cover her hands while doing prostrations, came in with a Tibetan one. And the consumers would always have a particular practical need for their carpet. Even the buyers, however, were unusual. The majority of income from buyers came from Tibet, and they were, in fact, Tibetan.

“Do you have more of these kinds?” the buyer asked pointing to a bright maroon decorated in the traditional “lotus in the pond” style. “I need 20.”

“We will have to look in the back. I think we only have five here in the show room,” responded Tashi Dhondhup, the young salesperson generally available to chat at the store. “They are not usually so popular.”

“Why they are so expensive? I have suppliers in India who can make it cheaper. Maybe I will look there.”

“Sir, these are 100 percent Tibetan wool, you cannot find such quality with such color in India. They just won’t stay.”

“Perhaps you are right. I will check back later to see if you have enough.”

When I questioned Tashi about the conversation he had with the buyer, he said that Tibetans value design and color over quality. “When carpets were first made, they were not 100 knots. They were between 40

and 60. Today, the carpets that sell the best have the best color more than design. The popularity of India wool is not surprising for carpets being shipped to Tibet.” As a whole Tibetan tastes show a major break from other types of consumers, and particularly emphasizes the divide between carpet connoisseurs and the original consumers of carpets. Tashi continued, “Many of the tourists that we do see are the same as many Tibetans or Nepali. They recognize 100 knots, but have difficulty telling between 80 and 60. They can feel the difference between Tibetan and New Zealand wool. And, of course, traditional patterns are the most popular.” He is quick to point out, though, that tourists rarely compare their own purchases to Tibetans. They simply are seeking a good quality product from a store with a good local reputation. And being just outside the gate to the Boudhanath Stupa certainly does not hurt the store’s business.<sup>80</sup>

Trina Carpets is perhaps the only factory out of the three that really does not rely on Tourism. Instead, using the contacts Rita made with her time on the Fulbright Commission, it has successfully marketed itself as a company for the high end of the market.<sup>81</sup> There are two prices, those for large buyers and those for custom orders. They charge per meter, for a 100 knot carpet, 54-60 USD for a buyer, and 90 to 120 USD for a custom order. 80 and 60 knot carpets are about the same with 36 to 48 USD, and 66 to 75 USD, for just a wool rug.<sup>82</sup> Note: all rugs go up in price when

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<sup>80</sup> Tashi Dhondhup, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 28, 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Christina Monson, May 9, 2009.

<sup>82</sup> Anand Lama, April 15, 2009.

they are non-traditional material or shape. While there are stock rugs available for purchase, Trina Carpets does not have a store in Kathmandu. Virtually all of the carpets I witnessed being produced had some variation from a traditional carpet, be it in the material or patterns. The absolute majority of rugs are made for custom order; though presently the market is forcing a gradual shift so that workers in the village factory, for instance, are now producing some stock rugs to be sold even at the local markets. But this is both rare and new, and as such I will still focus on the custom orders for which Trina Carpets is famous.

When talking to Anand, he mentioned four or five new materials that are now demanded by consumers. The advent of India silk, banana silk and hemp have all kept alive the diminishing markets to Western countries. His assertion that carpets are now truly Tibetan *only* because of the style in which they are made is truest by the orders in his factory. Most of the orders in the factory themselves were much larger than the 3 by 6, the largest being an order for the carpeting of a cruise ship. Shape, too, now includes circles which are much more difficult because the knotting of the carpet will twist unless the weaver is extremely skilled.

Even styles and patterns are changing. One of Trina Carpet's buyers, Ullman Textiles, is based in Seattle, and there has developed a reputation for selling "Surya" or "loop-and-cut" carpets. Generally, after weaver knots a row, it is then cut in order to create the strands, similar to folding a thread of yarn and cutting it in two. In a loop-and-cut carpet, part

of the row is left untouched, creating the “loop” as opposed to strands.

Coloring has also taken on different dimensions. There is an entire society of carpet buyers who are interested in “random coloring,” meaning that the background of a carpet has variations of one color. It is extremely difficult to produce and highly inconsistent, but has a large European market.<sup>83</sup>

And following this trend, of course, is the reluctance of many customers to use chemical dyes in their carpets; and thus the industry has seen a growth in the popularity of vegetable dyes instead which is more difficult to match the customer’s desired color.

Customers interested in Trina Carpets are not only interested in buying their “Tibetan” rug, but also very interested in getting a good quality rug. Their rug, more important than any cultural aspect is used for decorations—adorning the floor of their living room, rather than the beds of Tibetan families. Their carpet represents the mix of luxury and exoticism that Western consumers desire. Many have professional designers that are recommended, often, by Trina carpets that match the carpet’s surroundings. Many also are interested in getting a Tibetan carpet, as opposed to a machine-made one, because they last upwards of 50 years. If there is one word to describe what these consumers are interested in, it is *quality* which is further emphasized by Anand’s point that, “There is

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

still a market for 100 knot, luxury carpets. These consumers want quality and are willing to pay rather large prices for them.”<sup>84</sup>

The role of consumers in Marx’s theory is perhaps the most vital in the reification of the capitalist system. They are the *most* removed out of all agents from the production process. Marx argues that the consumer’s separation from labor is what separates consumers and divides classes into distinct groups. Without consumers, commodities would not become a *fetish*. Those who own the means of production may set a price, but it is the consumer that creates the final link, thereby adding a societal dimension to commodities. Ultimately, this cycle entraps all three groups into the system that necessarily takes advantage of at least one group; in the carpet industry that means the workers. Even understanding the system, he argues, is not enough to overcome it.<sup>85</sup>

At Jawalakhel, tourists are necessary for the functioning of the factory. JHC functions as a tourist experience. The bottom floors are open from three sides; the salespeople wield Tibet’s history as a sales pitch; all with the intention of convincing tourists to purchase a piece of their culture so they may survive. Because the tourists continue to buy carpets and visit the factory, Tibetans take advantage of the market; thus, the cycle continues. Of course, it is slightly different; these factories are planned productions with the intention of taking advantage of commodification. Here is where Marx’s latter point plays a role. Understanding the system

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<sup>84</sup> Anand Lama, April 11, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> Marx, ch. 1.

does little to change it. Carpet workers in Jawalakhel are still trapped in a form of work they would not choose. Perhaps in this respect, workers at Tinley carpets are a bit better off with their understanding of their jobs.

Though Tinley Carpets depends on tourism to a certain degree, it is able to sustain itself with relative ease because of the connections it has made with the local populations. This idea keeps cost of production low, and stops the market from becoming oversaturated with goods. In fact, carpets are cheap enough that Dholma and her family have one on the floor of their living room; not that costs are extremely cheap, the other rugs on the beds are still of lesser quality Indian wool. In such instances, Marx would predict a decreased tension between capitalists and the proletariat because the former can still find consumers at a market driven price, but the latter still feel some recognition of him or her self in the product. Note: tension may be decreased, but not destroyed. More curious, however, is the power of consumers in determining market value. The Tibetan buyer was willing to buy the lesser quality rug because that is what is demanded, thus proving once again that carpets are only as good as society says they are. Tinley Carpet Factory is a signpost of carpet trends. Nepal is beginning to feel the pressure of carpets from India and China and is struggling to keep things less expensive.

Consumer base is probably the strongest difference between Tinley and Trina carpets. Having no ethnic niche upon which to rely, it took advantage of business trends during the 80s that suggested opening a

carpet factory was a good idea. Even now, Anand is very clear that the market is only for 100 knot luxury carpets; selling even a few of them will create enough of a profit margin that a factory can go for a little while before being in monetary bind.<sup>86</sup> This has several implications for the industry. More than any other factory, Trina is on the cutting edge of style and taste. It relies on its upper end consumers to the point where *they* have taken over the industry. This is not to make a value judgment, but it is interesting that the group which has the least in or attachment to the industry has adapted to change the most...which is exactly what Marx would argue. There is no real line of how far a commodity will go to adapt to its consumers once it reaches the point of fetishism. Both of the other two have dabbled in exploring other popular trends i.e. including silk, but Trina carpets is entirely dedicated to making the consumer happy, virtually the definition of commodification that Marx presents. It then is almost natural that there are higher tensions in the carpet factory especially combined with the added stress that comes natural to conducting business in Nepal

Marx ultimately emphasizes the *irony* of commodity goods. The owner of the item provided no labor for its creation; and thus, further alienates workers from their work. This has two implications. First, workers are further alienated from their work, but second and perhaps more important, their influences gives more reason for capitalists to bend

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<sup>86</sup> Anand Lama, May 1, 2009.



to the will of consumers, regardless of the impact on workers.<sup>87</sup> Thus the tensions found in each of the factories are not particularly surprising; on the other hand, the degree to which tensions are a problem still rely pretty heavily on political and social influences. These latter forces, however, play a far less of a role in the consumer sector. Generally, in all three factories, consumers have only really been influenced if they come as tourists. When tourists do not come, Jawalakhel, in particular, struggles to make ends meet. These past couple of years has been particularly difficult for the factory because of Nepal's political climate. For once, Trina Carpets does not suffer as tremendously from the consumer end. On the other hand, a potential problem to come is definitely the financial crisis which will both decrease tourists and the amount of money tourists can spend on luxury carpets. It will be interesting to note the impact world affairs will have on the industry in coming years.

### ***Conclusion***

The Tibetan carpet industry, particularly as it exists in Nepal, is quite complicated and nuanced. The Marxist ideology of commodity fetishism provides a pretty accurate depiction of the carpet's commoditization process, and the impact among the applicable groups. Jawalakhel's attempt to create a paternalist state while competing in the market has resulted in the very least, in a commodification of Tibetan culture; ironically the commodification upon which the factory relies for survival. Private factories most certainly fit the pattern of

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<sup>87</sup> Marx, Ch. 1.

commodification, especially in regards to the master-worker relationship. But the dynamic of a developing country's capitalist system, particularly one in which the political situation is still in continuous flux, means that the application of a single framework, no matter how accurate it may be, is still insufficient in understanding the industry's intricacies. On the other hand, I had set out hoping to understand the relationship between the consumers, factories, and workers, which I hope I have done so with whatever degree of success.

There were a few limitations that I faced while doing my research. First, timing, though I was aware of short nature of this project, became more apparent when working in the factory environment. Because of the busy nature and the Maoist watch of some factories, I alternated the days in which I spent at each of the factories. I ended up spending about equal amounts with each, but talking to some groups, like the manager of the Nepali factory, more than others. My schedule relied heavily on my contacts having enough spare time to arrange their factories in a way that I would both be unobtrusive, and their workers would not feel harassed.

Second, any further research demands a solid knowledge of Nepali and Tibetan, particularly the former. I could get the managerial perspective without much difficulty as they spoke English, but virtually none of the workers at any of the three factories spoke any English. Fortunately I was blessed with some pretty spectacular translators and one or two primary informants who spoke just enough English, and without whom I could not do this project. My very basic Nepali did

provide a good introduction, and without which I think rapport would have been impossible to develop in such a short period of time.

Third, the very sensitive interplay between politics and economics, particularly with the new Maoist government and the current constitution writing process, meant that some areas of discussion were immediately made more difficult to broach. Asking questions like workers' wages became just a little more awkward as employers immediately felt the need to justify the decision based on the lack of capital, financial crisis, etc. Workers were hesitant to really discuss all of their problems because they were always in the factory, as it is both their home and work, and they are always watched by the master. Eventually, I was able to reach the point of asking difficult and often politicized questions, but more time would obviously give more insight and depth to these subjects.

Finally, striking a balance between the voices has grown to become an increasingly difficult task. This past month I have had the pleasure of meeting some of the most wonderful, generous, and kind-hearted individuals. They come from all backgrounds, ethnicities, and socio-economic groups. I spent time with the owners, as well as the workers. But their stories are often contradictory, and to present a satisfactory analysis of the Carpet Industry is to present both sides; the problem is that both sides have an emotional pull, and expect me to take on their causes. Having spent significant time with all groups, I think, has perhaps created a semblance of balance. I hope to do justice to both sides, not fail in the attempt, for as the saying goes, those who try to please everyone, end up pleasing no one.

Nepali industry as a whole has a long way to progress. Though the carpet market has diminished, it still supports a significant portion of the urban population. The external political pressures may cause a significant problem of capital flight; but just reigned in, it could possibly open up an entirely new field of village development. Perhaps when the political crises diminish in severity and frequency, workers may yet find their voice and tensions between management and workers will decrease or disappear altogether. In either case, a diminished market is not a dead market, and there is still a lot to learn from this industry.

### ***Suggestions for Further Study***

There are two areas of research that would be interesting to explore further. First, there are five definitive steps to making a carpet, any of which would be very interesting to track in a manner similar to weaving. I did have the opportunity to visit a hand-spinning factory in Jorpathi, and from there learned that labor is often outsourced because villages are cheaper. There is also a federation of spinning factories that has formed in order to resist both Maoist and international pressure. From outward appearances it does present a possible future or direction for private carpet factories, and thus would be interesting to explore further. Plus, many Bhutanese Refugees are involved in this part of the industry, and it would be fun to visit Jhapa.<sup>88</sup> Dyeing, Designing, and Washing present equally interesting perspectives on the role of Indians and Tibetans in creating carpets, especially since the Indian rug market is on the rise.

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<sup>88</sup> Tenzin Norbu, interview by author, Kathmandu, Nepal, April 20, 2009.

Second, politics plays a huge role within the economy. In fact, many people, including political leaders interchangeably refer to their party as well as the union they represent. Though the relationship between ANTUF and the Maoist Party is far closer than NTUC-I is to the NC, such a relationship still does exist.<sup>89</sup> To explore more thoroughly the dynamics between Labor Unions and carpet workers would make an excellent topic for another 40 page paper. Furthermore, most of my research shows a disillusioned attitude that workers have towards politics, as Nepal moves into a new political era, how and when workers choose to get involved will definitely be something to analyze.



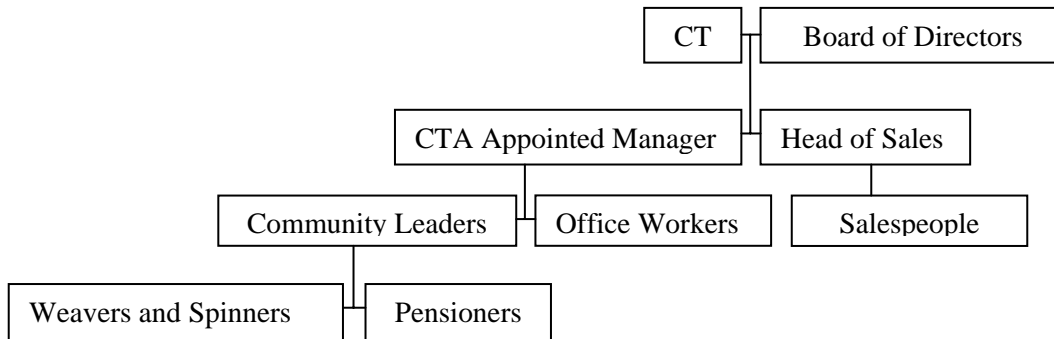
Above: Me, in Tinley Carpet Factory Letting the Children Play With My Camera.

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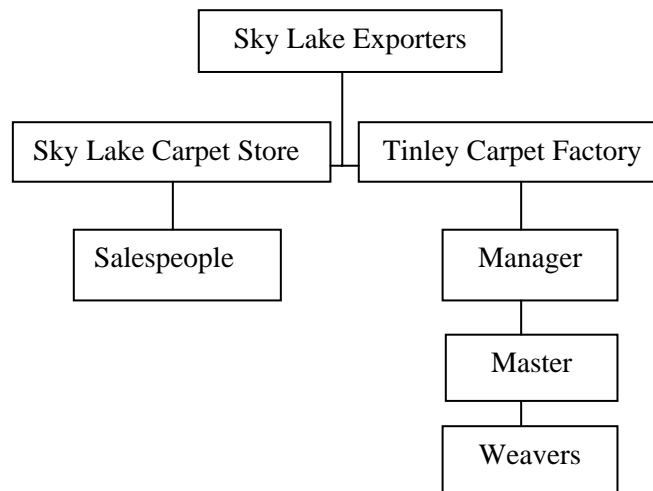
<sup>89</sup> Paul Gutierrez, interview by author, April 30, 2009.

## Appendix A – Graphs and Charts

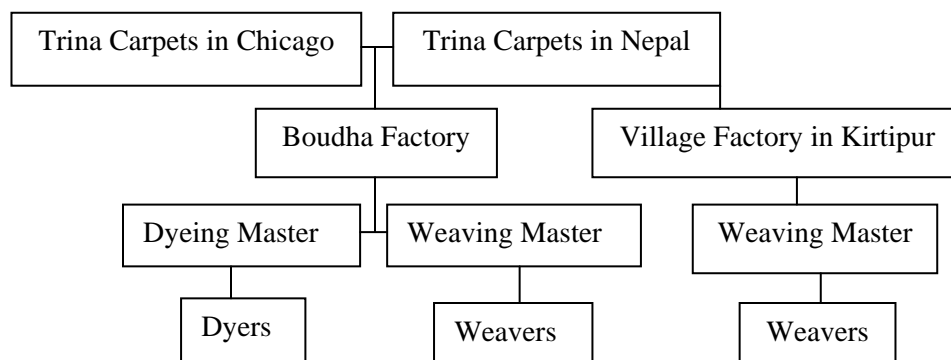
**Figure 1: Jawalakhel Handicraft Center**



**Figure 2: Tinley Carpet Factory Structure**



**Figure 3: Trina Carpet Factory Structure**



**Graph 1: Worker's Wages Compared (NRs. per square meter)**

		Factory		
		<i>Jawalakhel</i>	<i>Tinley Carpets</i>	<i>Trina Carpets</i>
<b>Knots per square in.</b>	<i>100</i>	2954	1600 – 2200	2200 – 2600
	<i>80</i>	1936	1200 – 1400	1600 – 1800
	<i>60</i>	1144	850	750 - 800

**Graph 2: Consumer Prices Compared (USD per sq. meter)**

		Factory				
		<i>Jawalakhel</i>	<i>Tinley Carpets</i>		<i>Trina Carpets</i>	
<b>Knots per square in.</b>	<i>100</i>	220	145	94*	90 – 120	54 – 60**
	<i>80</i>	145	90	75*	66 – 75	66 – 75**
	<i>60</i>	100	65-70	60*	36 -48	36 – 48**

\*Local Price

\*\*Buyer Price

## ***Appendix B – Background on Unions***

Unions in Nepal have a very political role. In many instances, they are directly affiliated with a political party. NTUC-I, for instance, is closely attached to the National Congress Party. ANTUF is considered synonymous with Maoists. There is the one other major union, the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT), and it is affiliated with The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist). In fact, the only people who make distinctions between unions and parties are the upper class elite, or people who work with unions professionally. Many of the people I interviewed used the terms interchangeably, unsurprising given that unions are used as gateways for launching a political career.<sup>90</sup>

This helps to explain two things: first, why union leaders are doing very little to help workers, and second, why there is so much resentment against unions and politics. Additionally, right now the goals of the two other major unions are solely political; they are working to bring ANTUF into line with appropriate tactics. The ANTUF has a nasty reputation for using violence and coercion. Within the first month of their affiliation with the Maoists, there were 55 violent clashes with GEFONT members alone. With factories they are coercive to the point where the other unions are afraid of what will happen to Nepali Industry.<sup>91</sup> The carpet industry has had a prevalent voice in all three unions, and so its workers are no exception to the trends, however, this industry is being hit particularly hard because of the reputation it has developed for being both wealthy and extremely hierarchical.

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<sup>90</sup> Paul Gutierrez, April 30, 2009.

<sup>91</sup> Krishna Shah, May 3, 2009.



### ***Appendix C – Child Labor***

Child Labor is a complicated issue that many people in the West choose to dismiss too easily. In Nepal, a developing country, the lack of education and opportunity only encourage children to find jobs as quickly as they can. Often, these jobs provide a means of escaping the poverty of village life. As such, the Children's Act of 1992 would define a "child" as anyone under the age of 16. The carpet industry has a particularly nuanced relationship with "child labor."

Most of the westerners I talked to had no problem in blaming child labor for the demise of the carpet industry, but most had no idea that there were other issues at play. In fact, while there have been child workers in factories, many of these rumors were exacerbated by competition in India and the Near East. Today, an organization called *Rugmark* is working towards eliminating child labor, but there are still problems. First, *Rugmark* refuses to involve itself in politics, meaning that it has very little actual power. Second, the organization itself is not the most trustworthy and has been accused of encouraging factories to move from Nepal to India. Ironically, out of all issues the Maoists ignored, child labor was the one it forcibly enforced, but a large part of this was simply a way to get more money out of factories.<sup>92</sup> I did witness some fourteen and fifteen year olds' working the loom, but it was uncommon. For the most part, the only other instance would be a mother who has a child misbehaving and then uses weaving as a form of time-out.

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<sup>92</sup> Krishna Shah, May 3, 2009.

*Appendix D – Photos*



Above: Women work on an 8 by 12 carpet in Kirtipur

Below: The traditional Chakra used to spin wool into Yarn





Above: Silk and Wool Yarn Dry After Being Dyed in a Pot

Below: At the Washing Plant, Cutters Work on Trimming Their Carpets





Above: Those Are the Tools Necessary for Weaving Tibetan Carpets

Below: An Example of the Hand Knotting that Defines Tibetan Carpets





Above: Reena Works on a Stock Rug Carpet at Tinley Carpet Factory  
Below: A Little Boy and His Mother Hustle About the Factory to Get Women Tea



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